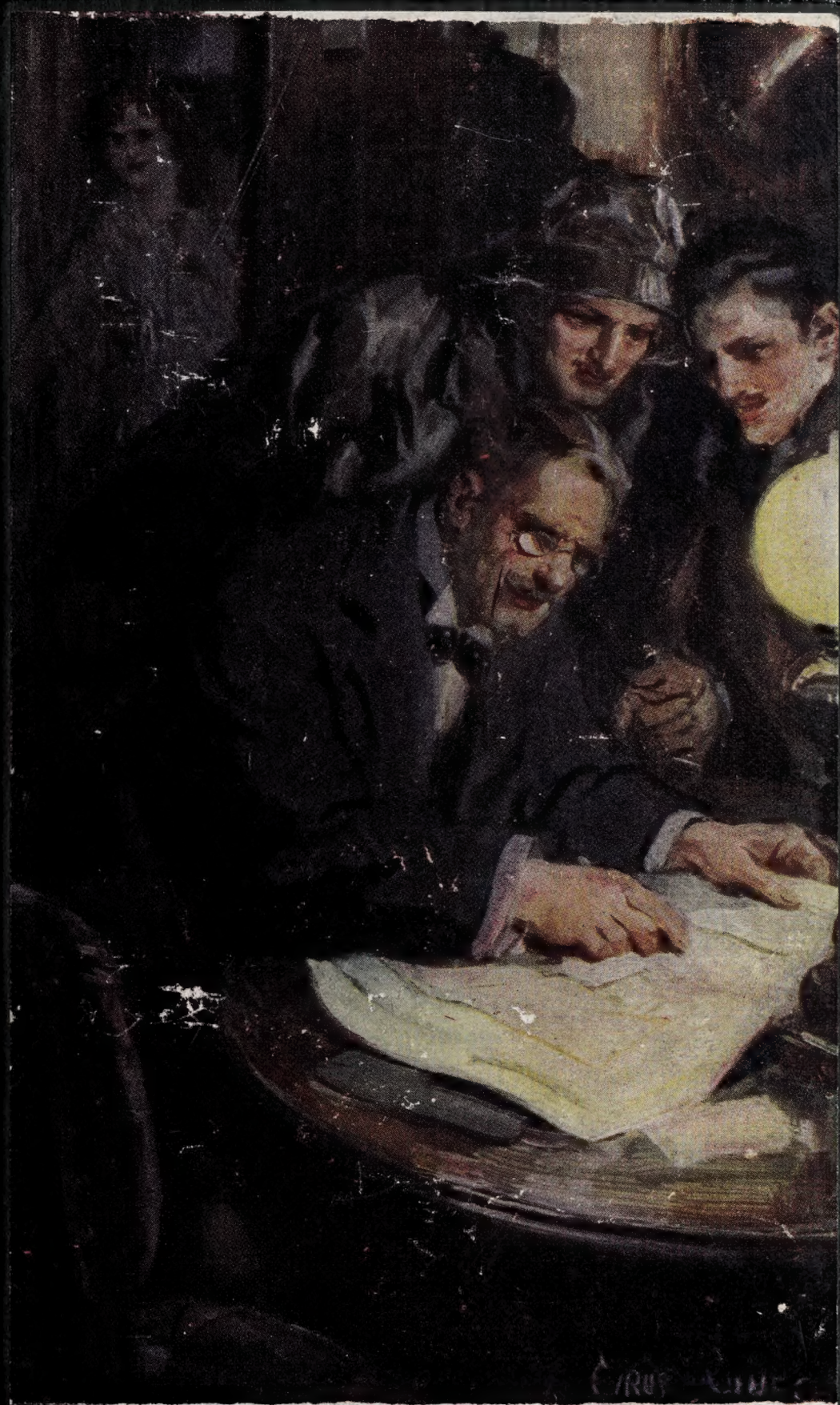


THE BORDERER



HAROLD BINDLOSS

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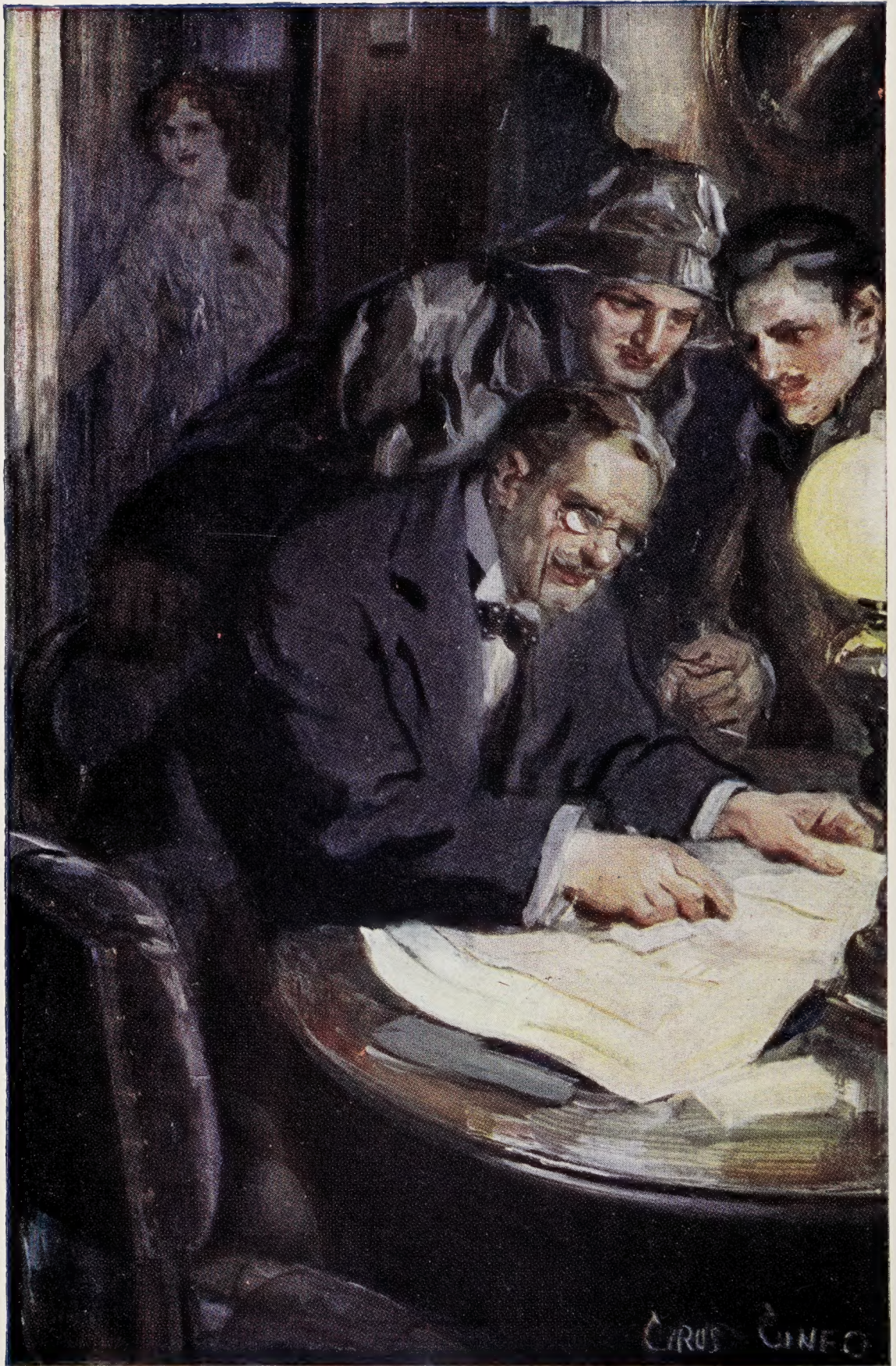


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THE BORDERER

By the same Author.

THE IMPOSTOR
BENEATH HER STATION
THE LIBERATIONIST
LEAGUE OF THE LEOPARD
A DAMAGED REPUTATION
THE DUST OF CONFLICT
HAWTREY'S DEPUTY
THE PROTECTOR
THE PIONEER
THE TRUSTEE
THE WASTREL
THE ALLINSON HONOUR
BLAKE'S BURDEN
THE SECRET OF THE REEF
THE INTRUDER
A RISKY GAME



“There were some papers in front of him, and the other men bent over the table examining them.” (Page 217).

The Borderer]

[*Frontispiece*

THE BORDERER

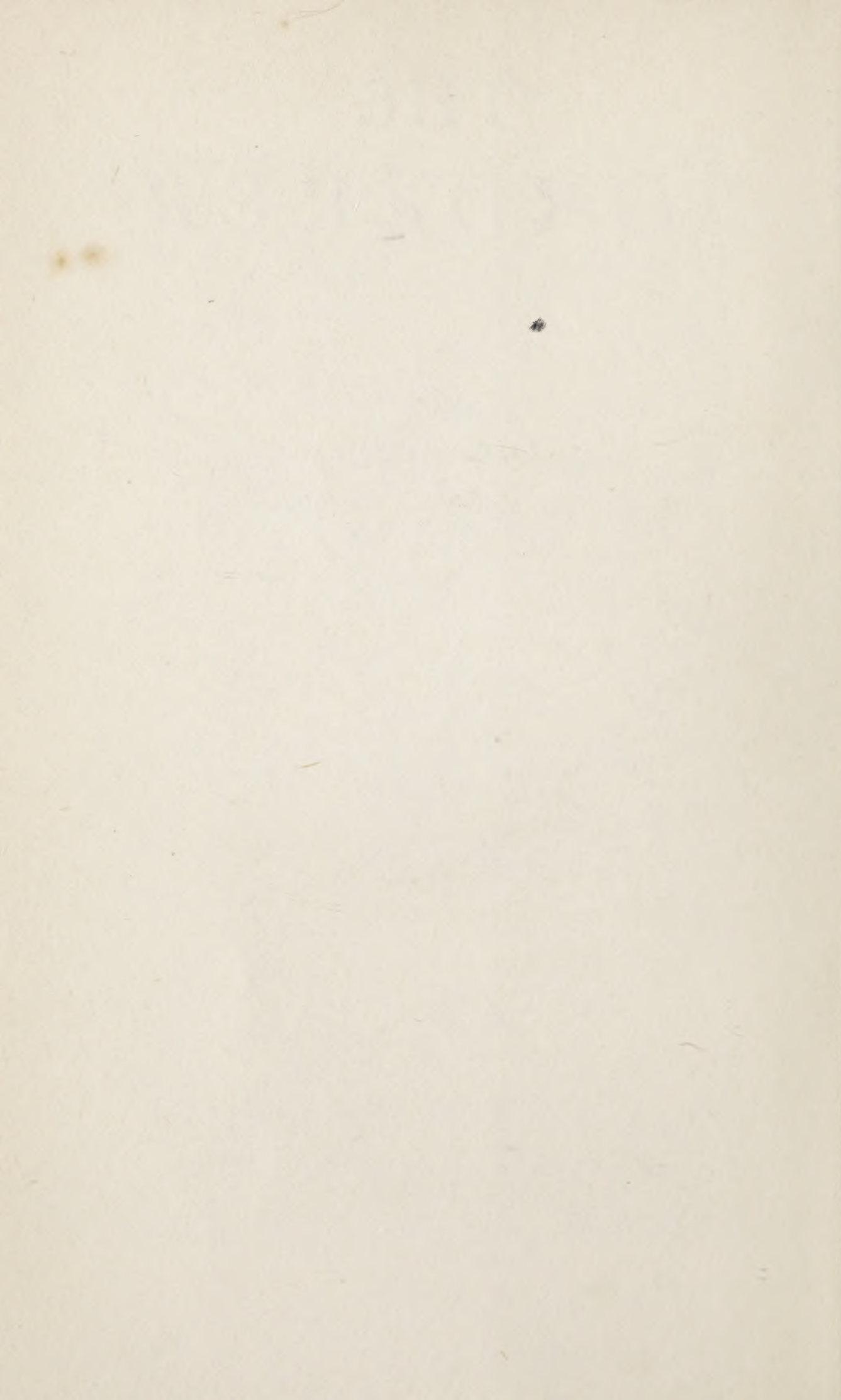
BY
HAROLD BINDLOSS

*Author of "The Impostor," "Hawtrey's Deputy,"
"The Protector," etc.*

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THE BORDERER.

CHAPTER I.

THE SUMMONS.

SABLE LAKE shone like a mirror among the ragged pines, as it ran back between the rocks, smooth as oil except where a puff of wind streaked its flashing surface with faint blue wrinkles. Behind it the lonely woods rolled on, south to Lake Superior and north to Hudson's Bay, though at some distance off a new trans-continental railroad ran through their midst. Hammers rang and noisy gravel-ploughs emptied the ballast cars along the half-graded track, but these sounds of human activity were quickly lost and in a mile or two only the splash of water and the elfin sighing in the pine-tops broke the deep silence of the woods. This belt of tangled forest, where the trees are stunted and the soil sterile, offers no attraction to homesteader or lumberman. In consequence, it has lain desolate since the half-breed *voyageurs*, who crossed it with canoe and dog-team, abandoned the north-west trail when the Canadian Pacific locomotives began to pant through the rock-cuts by Lake Superior.

The solitude, however, had drawn Andrew Johnstone into the quiet bush. The lone trail had a charm for him, and though he liked the water best, one cannot travel far in North Ontario without using the rivers. Andrew knew the empty spaces of Canada and his inaptitude for an idle life was an excuse for the

adventurous journeys he had indulged in. On the whole, he preferred some degree of hardship to conventional comfort ; he enjoyed a very small income and had no responsibilities, while the one career he could have thrown his heart into had been suddenly closed. He thought he might have made a good soldier and had entered Woolwich as a prize cadet, but a few weeks after leaving it met with an accident on a mountain crag. For some months he submitted to a famous surgeon's treatment, and then it became obvious that the British army would have no more use for him. Andrew was not crippled ; he could still walk well, but he dragged one leg a little and it gave him trouble now and then.

He sat on a stone in the shadow because the tent was insufferably hot. It was too bright to fish and a big grey trout already lay in the frying-pan beside the log hearth ; and lighting his pipe, he indulged in wandering thought while he languidly looked about. The pines were small and ragged ; some had been blackened by fire and some leaned drunkenly, but their resinous sweetness hung about the camp. In the shadow, the reflection of worn rock and rigid branch floated on the crystal water ; but the reflections quivered, and there was a soft splash upon the pebbles near Andrew's feet. He heard it with reminiscent satisfaction and a touch of longing. It reminded him of the swirl of the salt tide along the Solway shore, and his thoughts went back to the Old Country he had left two years ago.

The two years had been pleasantly spent in Canada and Andrew did not think he had wasted the time. He had no particular talents and no money to launch out in business, even if he had cared for it, while nobody needed him. He had, however, gone into the back country with a government survey, but as he had no Canadian certificates, the pay was not good. The only thing he knew much about was the management of sailing boats and this appeared to have no commercial value. That he had spent several years after his

accident cruising round the British coast alone was accounted for by the fact that he could not afford fashionable amusements and found living on board a small yacht cheap. He had made some daring voyages but was not proud of them, because, when one came to think of it, men like Cowper and MacMullen had easily beaten his best exploits.

Then he wondered what Elsie and Dick were doing at home at the old house in Annandale. He called Appleyard home because he loved it, better perhaps than Dick did, though it did not belong to him. When he was left an orphan, Dick's father had brought him up with stern kindness, and he had afterwards spent a month or two at Appleyard whenever it was possible. Indeed, in the old man's last illness, he had promised that so far as things permitted, he would look after his somewhat unbalanced cousin. Andrew remembered with a twinge that he had not done much to keep his promise, but, after all, there was no reason to believe that Dick needed him.

Next he thought of little Elsie, as he had called her, though she must be grown up now. He was much the elder, but they had always been good friends and he had felt that she trusted him; he could not tell why, but Elsie thought the best of everybody. No doubt, they would try to marry her to Dick, and, in one sense, it would be a suitable match, but while Andrew was fond of Dick he did not think him good enough for Elsie.

By and by he got up and looked across the lake. He wore an old blue shirt, brown overall trousers and thick leggings, because the bush of North Ontario is destructive to clothes. His pose, which was easy and virile, although one knee was bent, showed a wiry figure of medium height, and the strong sunshine touched his brown face. It was not a face that attracted attention, but the eyes were gravely good-humoured and the mouth was firm,

He was watching for the gleam of a varnished hull, because Whitney, his American partner, had gone to the railroad for provisions three days ago and should have returned. The canoe he had taken had been specially built for them in Toronto, because, although an Indian birch-bark would have satisfied Andrew, Whitney was rich. He was, moreover, a keen sport, and Andrew thought of him in his homely way as one of the best. Andrew freely trusted those he liked, and, quite unconsciously, inspired them with confidence in himself.

After a time, something twinkled far up the lake, but Andrew's eyes were keen, and distinguished a small dark speck amidst the play of light. This must be Whitney coming back, because only a canoe from which the varnish had not worn off would so catch the sunshine. When the craft had grown into shape, Andrew sat down again and watched her draw nearer with quiet approval. He liked to see things done well and there was a rhythmic precision in Whitney's movements that suggested well-directed power. The paddle flashed at exact intervals, the lithe form behind it bent with a graceful swing, and a curl of foam broke away from the gliding hull. Modern as she was, the canoe did not jar upon the primitive austerity of the wilds. Andrew felt this, though he could not have put it into words, for there was something innately primitive in him.

He sprang from a rugged stock, for he was a descendant of the Annandale Johnstones, whose crest was significantly the flying spur. Appleyard stood on the edge of the bleak moorlands that drop down to the western marches of the Scottish border, and he knew every lonely rise and boggy flat that his mosstrooper ancestors had ridden across on moonless nights. It is possible that in his youthful rambles across the high, wind-swept waste, he had acquired something that linked him to the past. In later times, his people had

made some mark as soldiers and explorers, but for the last two generations the head of the house had been a quiet country laird.

But Whitney was getting near and in a few minutes ran the canoe upon the shingle and stood smiling at Andrew when he had pulled her up. He was young and athletic, with brown hair and eyes, brown skin, a rather thin face, and an alert, half-humorous air. His clothes had been specially designed for hunting trips by a fashionable New York tailor, but now looked much the worse for use in the wilds.

"I've got the grub we wanted and brought our mail," he said, throwing Andrew a packet. "Here's your lot ; you can wade through it while I fix supper."

"That's my job," Andrew objected. "I'd have had things ready, only that I was stuck for flour and pork. You've covered some ground to-day."

"Some," said Whitney. "It was pretty fierce clambering over the portages with the canoe on my head, but I reckon I made much better time than I could have done when I struck the woods two months ago. Looks as if the harder you have to work, the stronger you get. Nature's way of fixing things ; you can trust her all right. Anyhow, I'm not tired. Sit down and read your news."

Andrew opened a letter addressed in a girlish hand, and while he read it, lingering over the words, his thoughts went back with longing to Appleyard on the Solway shore. He pictured the low house, built of Scottish granite and beaten by the winds ; the red moorland rolling north in waves ; and the flash of wet sands in the distance edged with white surf by the savage tides. It was an artless letter, treating of loved, homely things, but it showed sweetness of temperament and, Andrew thought, half-concealed uneasiness. The reason for this became obvious when he read the postscript :

"I am anxious about Dick. He is not very strong, you know, and I wish that you were here."

Andrew understood this and felt troubled, because Elsie never made the worst of things. Dick was weak of will as well as body, and the dissipation he now and then indulged in had a marked effect on him. There was nothing vicious in the lad, but he lacked balance, and it looked as if Elsie could not counteract the rather demoralizing influences Andrew imagined he was subjected to.

Then he opened a Montreal newspaper and forgot Appleyard. It was some time since any news from England had reached him, and the cablegrams predicted war. He read on until Whitney took the trout and a can of coffee off the fire, and told him that supper was ready. Andrew ate as usual, because he was hungry, but said very little and wore a pre-occupied air. Whitney waited until the meal was finished, and then turned to his comrade as he lighted his pipe.

"There's something worrying you," he remarked. "However, you needn't tell me if you don't like. One meets countrymen of yours who make one feel it hurts them to talk."

"I was wondering whether you'd mind my not going north with you on the hunting trip this fall."

"I certainly would mind," said Whitney. "All the same, I'll let you off if there's a reason."

Andrew folded the letter so that the last page came on top and handed it him with the newspaper. Elsie's letter must be treated with respect, but he did not object to Whitney's seeing it. The other gave it him back and carefully read the first column in the newspaper before he looked up. He wanted to understand the situation, and Andrew was not good at explaining.

"I don't quite get the drift of things," Whitney said. "First of all, who's Elsie Woodhouse?"

"In a way, she's like Dick's sister; they were brought up together and Elsie always tried to take care of him, though she's really no relation. You've heard me speak of Dick; he's my cousin."

Whitney nodded and tried to be patient. "You haven't made the matter much clearer. Do you want to go home because she's anxious about the fellow?"

"It's rather complicated," said Andrew with some hesitation. "You see, Dick's father brought me up, and I always thought, in his way, he was fond of me."

"Then he made a secret of it?" suggested Whitney, who found the workings of his companion's mind more interesting than the particulars about his relations. Andrew was sometimes slow, but one could rely on his doing the right thing in the end.

"He was of the old Scottish type," Andrew replied with a smile. "You don't know it, and it's fast dying out. Hard as granite on the surface, fastidiously just, and punctual as a clock. Calvinistic Presbyterian, of course, with pretty grim ideas of training youth. Yet he was a man you got fond of and you could depend on him."

"We have some survivals of the kind among the New England Puritans. You have to make allowances for them. Anyhow, you haven't put me wise yet."

"Well, I've sometimes thought he was too hard on Dick, who took after his mother—she was different. When he died, the lad rather broke loose, and I had some trouble with him. He'd listen to me now and then, and I felt I had to see he didn't come to harm."

"Just so; you would feel that! But I haven't got Elsie placed."

"Dick's mother soon married again, a man called Staffer; clever fellow, but I never quite trusted him. Then she died, and Staffer was left in charge of Appleyard until Dick came of age. He brought his sister there, Mrs. Woodhouse, a widow, and Elsie's her daughter. They were both quite young then, but from the beginning Elsie made it her business to take care of Dick."

"You like her?" said Whitney, noticing a certain tenderness in his companion's voice.

"Yes," said Andrew slowly, "I never liked anybody quite as much ; but that's all there is about it. She's much younger than I am, and she'll probably marry Dick."

"If she's like his sister and has been looking after him, she more probably won't. I'm getting Dick fixed as a bit of a maverick. He and his stepfather don't get on."

"On the contrary, they get on very well ; that's the trouble."

"How ?"

Andrew hesitated. "Well, you see, Staffer does most things well ; he's excellent company and a witty talker, the kind of man a lad would try to copy, but that needs a steadier head than Dick's."

"Makes the pace pretty hot ; one of your smart set ?"

"Well," said Andrew thoughtfully, "he's extravagant, but although his private means aren't large never gets into debt. He'll play cards on champagne half the night, and get up next morning as steady as a rock and bring down a cork-screwing snipe with the first barrel. I've seldom seen a better man on a horse."

"Think I've got him placed. Your cousin will want nerve and judgment to play up to him. But we'll take the newspaper now. Why do you want to go back ? You won't fight."

"I can't," Andrew replied with some colour in his face. "It's my misfortune ; after I fell on the Pillar Rock."

Whitney gave him a sympathetic nod. "You take me wrong ; I mean your countrymen. It's been stated in your parliament that they have no obligation to fight for France."

Andrew quietly filled his pipe. "They won't see her smashed."

"I'm not sure of it, after reading the English newspapers."

"You don't know us yet," Andrew replied.

Whitney smiled, for he knew his comrade would carry out an obligation to the farthest limit, but he said nothing, and for the next few minutes Andrew thoughtfully looked about.

The sun was getting low, and dark shadows stretched across the glassy lake, but in the distance a small grey dot moved amidst a ring of widening ripples. He knew it was a loon fishing and presently a wild, unearthly cry rang through the stillness as the bird called its mate. After that, everything was very quiet, except for a soft splash of falling water a long way off. The dew was settling on the brush about the camp, and the cooling air was heavy with the fragrance of the pines. It all appealed to Andrew; the lonely woods had a charm for him, but he must leave them.

"I'm lame and not much use, but it doesn't seem quite the thing to stay here enjoying myself, just now," he said. "Anyhow, Elsie needs me and I could keep an eye on Dick." He paused, and added in a more hopeful tone: "Then perhaps something I could do might turn up when I get home."

"You haven't got a home. You lived in a boat for some years, didn't you?"

"I thought of living in one again. It's cheap and gives you liberty; you can move about where you like. Then there's good wildfowl shooting in the bays, along our coast. That would keep me occupied—if I could find nothing else."

"Pretty lonely, isn't it?" Whitney suggested.

"Sometimes. When you're wind-bound in a desolate gut among the sands, the winter nights seem long. Then, if you have to clear out in a hurry, with a sudden breeze sending the sea inshore and there's the anchor and kedge to get, you feel you'd like an extra hand."

"Then why don't you ship one?"

"It's hard to find the right man. Living on board a small cruiser hasn't much attraction, unless you're used to it."

Whitney chuckled. "That's easily understood, but I guess you want a partner. Would I suit?"

Andrew gave him an eager look and then answered discouragingly: "It's rough work; you're often wet through and can't dry your clothes, and sometimes there's not much to eat. You can't cook on a miniature stove when she's rolling hard. Then there's no head-room and you get cramped because you can't stand up straight."

"Just so," said Whitney. "Well, I allow it can't be much rougher than clambering over rock ledges and smashing through the brush with a canoe upon your head. Anyhow, if you have no marked objections, I'm coming along. For one thing, an English friend of ours who lived in New York has a shooting lodge in the Gallo-way district and my mother and sister are over there. I can plant myself on to them, if you make me tired."

Andrew said nothing and Whitney thought him reluctant to take advantage of his rash offer.

"Well," he resumed, "that's fixed. We'll pull out at sun-up and get on to the Canadian Pacific at White-fish Creek. I'll try to catch a trout now, and then we'll go to sleep."

He launched the canoe, and when he paddled out across the darkening lake, Andrew sat, quietly satisfied, by the sinking fire. He did not know what he might find to do when he reached Scotland, but he would have a partner in whom he had confidence.

CHAPTER II.

A PAINFUL MEMORY.

A WEEK after leaving Sable Lake, Andrew and Whitney stood one night on Portage Avenue, Winnipeg. The air was hot and oppressive, as it often is in the prairie city during late summer, and smooth sidewalks and roadway, wet with heavy rain,

glistened like ice in the lamplight. The downpour had now slackened to a scattered splashing of big, warm drops, and thunder rumbled in the distance. At one place, the imposing avenue was blocked by a crowd through which the street cars crept slowly with clanging bells. The crowd seemed bent on holding its ground, but there was not much jostling, and its general air was one of stern interest rather than excitement. The small dark figures that filled the gap between the towering buildings were significantly quiet, and where a ray of light fell across them, the rows of faces were all turned in one direction.

Andrew studied them as he stood on the outskirts of the throng. Human nature interested him, and he noticed first that the men were better dressed and looked more prosperous than the members of similar gatherings he had watched in the Old Country. It was, however, not altogether their clothes that conveyed the impression; there was a hint of self-confident optimism in their faces and bearing, though one could see that they were graver than usual. Their appearance was rather American than British, and although this was mainly suggested by certain mannerisms and the cut of their clothes, Andrew was conscious of a subtle difference he could not explain. For one thing, an English street crowd is generally drawn from one particular walk of life, and if units of different rank join it they stand apart and separate. This gathering in Winnipeg included men of widely different callings—farmers from the plains, merchants, artizans, clerks, and flour-mill hands—but they had, somehow, an air of common purpose and solidarity. Whitney indicated them after he lighted a cigarette.

“It’s most an hour before our train goes out and these folks evidently expect a new bulletin to be posted up soon,” he said. “They interest me because I don’t know how to class them. They’re developing themselves on our lines, but they don’t belong to us.

Now, if this was one of our cities, there'd be something doing ; jostling and pushing, or somebody would start a song. Yet I guess they wouldn't like you to call them Englishmen."

"That's true," Andrew agreed.

"Well," resumed Whitney, "I sure can't fix them. They're pretty good customers of ours and anxious to trade, and yet when we offered them reciprocity they wouldn't have it. They had all to gain, because the natural outlet for their commerce is to the south, but they reckoned they were British and shut the door on us. Then I was across here during the Agadir trouble, and my notion is that if you had asked for men they'd all have come. On the other hand, I get on with them better than you can, and if we wanted a job in this city, I'd get it before you. Now our states are sovereign, but they're all American."

"Ours are sovereign, but not English," Andrew replied. "One's strictly Canadian, another frankly Australian, and so on. We're an individualistic race, and our different branches grow their own way. It looks a loose arrangement, but we've found we hold together well. You'll see when the bulletin comes out, if it's what I expect."

"We'll wait. But what's this fellow talking about ? "

A short, dark-skinned man had buttonholed a neighbour and was speaking vivaciously, his dark eyes snapping.

"But, *mossieu'*, the alliance, *la belle alliance !* " he exclaimed, and turned to Andrew. "Is it not determine in London that we fight ? "

"Spotted you first time, partner," Whitney remarked with a smile, and then asked the man : "When did you come over ? "

For a moment the other looked puzzled, and then replied : "Two hundred year ; that is, the family she arrive. Me, I am born in Kebec."

Whitney looked at Andrew. "You haven't made

much of a Britisher of him yet. They'll speak better German in Alsace in much less time, if the Prussians keep their grip."

"Alsace!" cried the French-Canadian. "*Attendez, mais attendez*; the great day comes. Together we take her back. It is an obligation. *Vive la belle alliance!*"

"Your folks allow there isn't one," Whitney remarked to Andrew.

"I don't know. This is certain; if our friend's attacked, we step into the ring."

Then there was a sudden movement in the crowd, which pressed closer upon the newspaper office opposite, and a cry was raised as a lighted car came clanging down the street:

"Hold that driver up!"

The car slowed, but still came on, until a well-dressed citizen stepped quietly in front of it.

"Stop right now," he said. "You can't get through."

The car stopped and as the passengers got out, a window in the tall building opposite was opened. A bulletin board was hoisted in, and for the next two minutes the crowd stood silent and motionless. Andrew felt his nerves tingle and noted that Whitney's face was tense, though his interest in the matter could hardly be personal. There was something that stirred the imagination in the sight of the intent, quiet throng that waited the result of a crisis not of their making. They had had no say in the quarrel that began far off in the obscure East; but one could not doubt that they meant to make it theirs, and their stern gravity caused Andrew a half-conscious thrill of pride.

After all, they sprang from British stock and he knew what kind of men they were. He had seen the miles of wheat that covered the broken, prairie waste, cities that rose as if by magic in a few months' time, and railroads flung across quaking muskegs and driven through towering rocks, at a speed unthought of in

the mother country. He had heard the freight trains roaring through the great desolation between the Ottawa and the Western plains, where no traffic would ever be found, and had wondered at the optimism which, in spite of tremendous obstacles, had built eight hundred miles of track to link the St. Lawrence to the rich land beyond. These Canadians were hard men who tempered with cool judgment a vast energy and enthusiasm, and the mother country's foes would have to reckon with them.

Then there was a strange, dead silence, as the board was replaced and the bold black letters stood out in the lamplight. So far as Andrew could afterwards remember, the bulletin read :

“ War inevitable. England must keep her word !

“ Kaiser's armies marching. British fleet sails with sealed orders.”

A few cablegrams followed, and when they were read a deep murmur rose from the crowd, but there was no strong excitement, which Andrew had not expected. These were not the men to indulge in emotional sentiment ; their attitude indicated relief from suspense, and steady resolve. Perhaps it was characteristic that the man who had stopped the car, waved his hand to the driver.

“ Now you can start her up,” he said.

Breaking into groups, they began to talk, and Andrew caught snatches of their conversation.

“ A big thing, but we're going to put it through,” said one. “ If you hadn't fired out Laurier, we'd have been rushing our own fleet across the ocean now.”

“ Well,” his neighbour replied, “ we've got the boys. We want to call a city meeting, right off. Manitoba can't be left behind.”

“ Manitoba's all right,” another remarked. “ We'll send them all the flour they want, besides men who can ride and shoot. They'll put the Maple Leaf right up to the front. But we want to hustle before Regina and

Calgary get a start of us." The man turned to a companion who was moving off. "Stop a moment; I'm coming along."

"I'm going home," said the other. "It's beginning to rain and there's nothing doing now. We're up against a tough proposition and want to grip it sensibly."

They went off, followed by other groups, and as one passed, Andrew heard an exultant voice. "I you tell what happen. *Vive la belle alliance!*"

Then Whitney touched Andrew and remarked, as they crossed the emptying street: "I expect you noticed they didn't talk about the Old Country's programme. It's what Manitoba and the West are going to do they're interested in, and my notion is it will be something big."

"One feels that," Andrew agreed. "Somehow, it's stirring."

"Well," said Whitney, "this kind of thing's contagious, and when they hoist the flag you'll see some of the boys from our side riding across the frontier to the rally."

"You're bound to keep neutral."

"Sure," said Whitney with a smile; "that is, officially; but when a man who can drop a flying crane with the rifle and bust a wild range horse comes along, they won't ask if he was born in Montana or Saskatchewan."

They walked up Main Street and it was obvious that the news had spread, for talking men blocked the sidewalk here and there, and the wide windows of the hotels were full. When they reached the station, Whitney went off to check their baggage, and Andrew sat down, rather disconsolately, in the great waiting-room. The damp weather had affected his leg, and he frowned as he stretched it out, for his aches reminded him painfully of his disadvantages. The waiting-room has no equal among English stations, and Andrew duly remarked its marble floor, vast, domed roof, and rows of stately pillars. It was scrupulously clean and

well lighted, and clever paintings of Canadian scenery adorned the walls. A summer-evening train from Winnipeg Beach had just arrived, and a stream of smartly-dressed excursionists passed through the hall, breaking off to ask for the latest news. Their keen interest was significant, and Andrew felt downcast. Canada approved the Old Country's action and meant to do her part ; but he was useless, nobody wanted him.

Moodily lighting a cigarette, he remembered his youthful ambitions, for he had meant to follow where his ancestors had led. It was not for nothing that their crest was the flying spur and their traditions had fired him to the study of difficult sciences, which he had mastered rather by dogged determination than cleverness. His heart was in his work, he meant to make a good horse-artilleryman, and he had thrilled with keen satisfaction when the examiners placed him near the top of the list.

Then came the momentous day in Ennerdale that altered everything ; Andrew could remember it well. Fine rain wet their faces as they toiled up Scarf Gap from Buttermere. There were three in the party, all in boisterous spirits, for they were young and the climbing trip had been arranged to celebrate the successful beginning of their careers. Herries, who carried the rope with the red thread among its strands, had won honours at St. Andrews ; Catteral was going to India with a draft of the Royal Engineers ; and Andrew had just got his commission in the Horse Artillery. A rosy future, in which each would do the work he liked, was opening up, and they made breathless jokes as they scrambled across the wet stones and boggy grass in the searching rain.

When they reached the summit of the pass, Ennerdale was filled with drifting mist and a bitter wind wailed among the rocks. It was not a good day for the Pillar, but Andrew was used to the Scottish fells, Herries hoped to join the Alpine Club, and Catteral

had diligently practised climbing with a view to survey work among the khuds of northern India. Of the three, Andrew was the least at home among the crags, because the border hills are, for the most part, heath and bog.

It got darker as they went down into the mist, and the steep slopes ran up behind them like the sides of a bottomless pit, but the roar of a stream grew louder, and, at length, they stopped beside a wild rush of foaming water, fed by melting snow on Green Gable. The way it boiled among the stones gave them pause, but eager youth is not to be denied, and two had chosen a profession in which danger and hardship must be endured. Besides, February days are short, and they had only time to climb the Pillar and reach Wasdale before darkness fell.

They plunged through, waist-deep, and followed the roaring beck until a gust of wind rolled back the fog and the Pillar rose before them, majestic and daunting. Breaking out like a giant buttress from the dark hillside, it ran up, a vast, forbidding mass of rock, with streaks of mist clinging in the gullies and leaden cloud wrapped about its head. All three looked at it thoughtfully, while Herries uncoiled the rope; and then bootlaces, straps, and buttons were carefully examined. One could not run a needless risk in the climb before them.

"We might have had a better day, but the rain's clearing off," Herries remarked. "If we're to try Moss Ghyll and the Needle, to-morrow, we must take the Pillar now."

Andrew was doubtful, but did not say so, and Catteral nodded. "All right. One understands that our fellows have to work among worse places on the Afghan frontier."

His answer appealed to Andrew, for both were keen. Soldiering was not an amusement to them but a serious profession, and they had tried to fit themselves for it in mind and body. It was a career in which they meant to make their mark.

They put on the rope and Herries led. Andrew took second place, and Catteral last, but there are several ways up the Pillar and they did not choose the worst. Herries was a daring climber, but he knew his limit when the rocks were wet. They went up, the leader stopping now and then where he could steady the rope for the second man. All went well, until it was necessary to make an awkward traverse and then turn a corner, and Andrew, with his foot on a tiny ledge and his hand in a crack, watched Herries crawl across the slippery face and disappear. For a few moments afterwards the rope ran round the edge, and then stopped.

"I've got a fair hold, but take care at the corner," Herries called.

Andrew looked down at Catteral, who was supporting himself by his back and knees in a gully some distance below.

"Come up until you reach the ledge. I want more slack," he said.

Catteral obeyed, and seeing him safely posted, Andrew began the traverse of a long, wet slab. Using his knees and the nails clamped over the edge of his boots, he reached the corner and stopped for a few moments to gather breath. He could, by careful balancing, stand upright, but although his head was steady his position somewhat daunted him.

The mist was gathering again, and he looked straight down from an angle of the buttress into Ennerdale. Trails of grey vapour clung about the rocks, and the dim, black bulk of a mountain loomed out across the tremendous chasm. Still, the sensations the spot inspired him with must not be indulged in, and he felt for a hold among the stones above, preparatory to drawing himself up. His hands were wet, but a tuft of ling grew in a cranny and he could steady one foot on it.

The lift was easier than he thought, but when his waist was nearly level with the ledge he meant to gain, the tuft of ling gave way. For a few horrible moments

his nailed boots scraped the rock while his cold fingers lost their grip. He had time for a breathless, warning shout, and then slipped back.

He fell some distance, striking the slab before the rope brought him up, and as he did so, felt something crack and a sting of fiery pain. This, however, must not be thought about, and with what sense was left him he wondered whether he would drag his companions down. Afterwards it transpired that Catteral had prevented the disaster by gathering in some slack, so that Andrew hung by two lengths of rope instead of one. For all that, the slope he rested on was dangerously steep and he lay with his broken leg beneath the other. The pain got insupportable, but he set his teeth and tried to bear it. The others were clinging precariously to a nearly perpendicular wall, and, unless he could help them, all must go. They called to him and though their voices were strained, he thought they were cool.

"Can you hold on for a minute while I get the rope round a knob?" Catteral asked.

"I'll try," said Andrew, and did so in torture.

The rope was made fast and when Herries swung himself round the corner a council was held. It was impossible to take Andrew up and they could not get him down; held by the rope, he could lie upon the steep slab, but that was all.

"I heard there were some climbing men at Wasdale, and the Pillar's a good draw," Catteral remarked. "Then those fellows at the 'Fish' said they were going out with the rope to-day."

It was a slender hope, but they clung to it. There was nothing to which the rope could be securely fastened while one of them went for help, and the other climbers might have gone somewhere else. To make things worse, the rain began again and the mist gathered about the crag. The wind roared in the gullies and the hoarse clamour of the beck rose from

far below. There was, however, no other sound, and they knew that except for an occasional climbing party, it was seldom that anybody crossed the lonely head of Ennerdale in winter.

Andrew began to get numb and faint, but the acuteness of the pain helped him to keep his senses, and, by and by, he thought he heard a rattle of stones. Then Catteral shouted, and Andrew took courage when an answer came up : " All right ; we'll join you as soon as we can."

Then they waited. At times, they heard a clatter of heavy boots and a warning shout, after which there was silence except for the roar of the wind, until the scraping of iron nails began again. It would take nerve and skill to reach them, but the sounds drew nearer, and at length a hot and gasping man lifted himself out of a gully. Two more followed and stopped, breathing hard, while their leader and Herries spoke. Explanations were needless, for the difficulty of the situation was plain, and Herries said briefly : " His leg's broken."

" It's awkward," the other replied. " Well, we must try to get him down."

On the face of it, this seemed impossible, for the great crag, dripping with rain, fell almost straight to the dale, but Andrew had two sound arms and one sound leg, and there were five men who knew their business to help him.

" The sooner we begin, the better," one of the strangers said.

Andrew did not remember much about the descent. Part of it was like a nightmare, in which his companions did preposterous things. They were cool and cautious, but in some of the pitches they could not take all his weight and it was not invariably his uninjured leg that touched a slippery landing first. Still, he thought he kept his head until he reached the bottom, where he collapsed on the wet grass with the blood soaking through his coarse stocking.

After that he knew nothing except what Herries subsequently told him. They could not carry him to Buttermere across Scarf Gap; Black-sail Pass was as rough and steeper, and though the bottom of the dale was level, there was no house for a long distance that way. They took it when they had pulled up a fence stake, to which they firmly tied their patient. Carrying him by turns, they stumbled down the beck, and presently met a shepherd. He told them there was a stack of bracken farther on with a ground-sledge close by, on which the fern was carried out for stable litter, and with his help Andrew was hauled down the valley to the Anglers' Inn. Six months later he resigned his commission, knowing he would never walk quite straight again.

Well, all that was done with, but now, when Britons everywhere were springing to arms, he was good for nothing. He reflected gloomily that he might as well have stayed in Canada, but Elsie seemed to need him, and perhaps something he could do might turn up. Then Whitney came to look for him, and soon afterwards an official at the door announced that the Toronto express was about to start.

CHAPTER III.

THE SOLWAY SHORE.

THERE was a light wind from the westward, and the flood tide, running east, smoothed the sea to a faintly wrinkled heave, when the *Rowan* crept across Wigtown Bay on the southern coast of Scotland. Andrew lounged at the tiller while Whitney sat in the cockpit, holding a tray on which were laid out a pot of smoke-tainted tea, several thick slices of bread, sardines, and marmalade. Whitney wore a woollen sweater which had been white a few days ago, and now was dingy grey, new blue trousers, already

streaked with rust, and an expensive yachting cap that had got badly crushed. His hands were not immaculate, and there was a soot-smear on his face.

"This kind of yachting's not quite what I've been used to," he remarked. "On Long Island Sound you don't get the sea we ran into coming round the head last night, and when we went cruising in small craft we hired somebody to do the dirty work."

"There's not much room for a paid hand on board the *Rowan*," Andrew replied, hesitatingly. "Still, if you'd like——"

"You don't want a man."

"He would be rather in the way, and I don't know what he'd find to do, except the cooking."

"And hauling the dinghy up a muddy beach, taking out the kedge on a stormy night, and pulling twenty fathoms of heavy chain about when you shift your moorings! I could think of a few other trifles I'd sooner somebody else attended to, if I tried, but I won't insist. It looks as if I was going to get some muscle up."

Whitney thought his comrade had a private reason for dispensing with a paid hand, who was certainly not needed for open-water navigation, since Andrew had shown himself quite capable of sailing the *Rowan* alone. After searching the Glasgow yacht-agents' registers for a boat of sufficiently light draught, they had bought her at an Ayrshire port, and Whitney got a surprise when his partner drove her through the furious tide-race that swirls round the Mull of Galloway, in a strong breeze of wind. He had confidence in the *Rowan* after that, and putting down his cup, glanced about her approvingly.

She was thirty-two feet long, low in the water, and broad of beam, but her mast was short and her canvas snug; Whitney knew the disadvantages of a long, heavy boom. Her deck was laid with narrow planks that had lost their whiteness, for there were stains like blood upon them where the rain had run from the

mainsail, which was tanned with cutch. Now the canvas glowed a warm orange in the evening light as its tall peak swayed gently across the sky, and the ripples that lapped the gliding hull united beneath the counter and trailed astern in silky lines. To starboard, far off, the Isle of Man rose in a high, black saw-edge above the shining sea; ahead, to the east, water and sky were soft blue; to port, the Scottish hills rose in shades of grey and purple. Andrew named them as the boat crept on.

“Cairn Harry, running straight up from the water; Dirk Hatteraik stored his brandy in a cave on Raven Crag, and John Knox hid in Barrholm tower, in the long patch of woods. The black ridge behind is Cairns-moor o’ Fleet, and a waste of moors runs back from it towards the head of Clyde. The water of Cree flows through the dark hollow.”

“The Cree!” Whitney exclaimed. “It’s up there my folks are staying. Our friend has a grouse moor and some salmon rights.” Then he paused and laughed. “I can imagine them sitting down to dinner under the electric light in somebody’s ancestral hall, with a frozen British butler running the show. Wonder what they’d say if they knew I wasn’t far off, living like an Indian on board this craft. But I guess they’re getting resigned to my turning out a crank.”

“There are no ancestral halls beside the Cree, and electric lights are scarce in the Galloway wilds. But what are your mother and sister like?”

“That’s not easy to answer. Mrs. Whitney is something like myself; distinguished by my frankness, easy to get on with, and simple until you try to get ahead of her. When Madge puts on her joy-rags she’s rather like an old-time French marquise; pretty as a Versailles miniature, but more red-blooded than the usual Watteau style. In fact, she’s as blunt as a Western cowboy when she’s riled. Anyhow, you’ll see them, but they’re going to have some trouble in placing you.”

He chuckled over this, because he thought he understood his comrade's inconsistency of character. On the surface, Andrew was easy-going, ingenuous, and diffident, but beneath this lay an unwavering firmness. Whitney thought people who presumed to treat him as a good-humoured fool would regret their mistake.

"Historic country, isn't it?" he remarked, to make Andrew talk.

"Yes," said Andrew in an apologetic tone as he started his favourite hobby. "All its mosses and stony rises have been fought over by the old south-country clans; the Kennedys abreast of us, Lochinvar Gordons, and Douglasses of Threave farther on, as we are heading. Then you come to the Maxwells, Jardines, and Johnstones about the Nith and Annandale; after that the Buccleugh country with the Elliots and Armstrongs along Esk and Liddel. That was the western road to England, down which the invasions came. But I'm talking like a guide book; you'll get bored."

Whitney lighted a cigarette. "Go on. Madge is interested in this kind of thing, and I'll surprise her some day by my knowledge. You can give me some pointers about what those old fellows did."

"Bruce came from Carrick, north-west of the hills; it was at a spot among them the Covenanters first invited William of Orange over. Farther east, they were hunted through the moors by Claverhouse and Grier of Lag; to-morrow I'll show you the island where the fiery ship put in when Grier was dying. The Annandale men were independent mosstroopers who harried Cumberland when the nights got dark enough, but the Eskdale clans often united to ride south with the main Scotch armies. Edward the First was marching on Eskdale when he died by Solway sands."

"Eskdale seems to stick in your mind."

"It was the open road to England," Andrew replied, with a thoughtful air. "Prince Charlie used it last, and of course we have come to believe it would never

be taken by another hostile force, but——” He broke off and loosed a rope. “You might give her a foot or two more sheet.”

Whitney looked hard at him while he did so, but saw that Andrew would say nothing more.

“Your forefathers seem to have been a pretty tough, hard-fighting crowd,” he observed. “I wonder how many generations it takes for that kind of thing to work out of the blood.”

Andrew did not reply. He was not a sentimentalist, but he knew the instincts of the old mosstroopers were still alive in him. Then he frowned as he looked south-east across the shining sea, for Skiddaw’s cone, etched in blue, cut against the sky, and just beyond it rose Grassmoor’s shadowy mass. It was from the foot of the latter hill he had set out on the winter morning that saw the end of his career.

The sea grew slowly dimmer, the sunset glow behind them faded to a smoky red, and while they drifted east with the flood tide a black island detached itself from the dusky shore. By and by a trembling beam flashed out from its summit.

“The Ross,” said Andrew. “I was wrecked there.”

“Tell me about it,” said Whitney, who lounged in the cockpit, watching a razor-bill that had risen with a hoarse croak from the boat’s rippling wake.

“It was the only time such a thing happened to me, and I don’t understand it yet. I was living on board the *Arrow* then, shooting from a punt, and left Gibb’s Hole on Rough Firth, which breaks the north shore of the Solway, on a November afternoon. She was a stiff, roomy boat, of nearly nine tons, and I’d just had her pulled up at Glencaple for an overhaul. Dick, my cousin, found me a Glasgow carpenter who had been building some anglers’ boats at Lochmaben.”

“What had the carpenter to do with your being wrecked?” Whitney asked, for Andrew sometimes wandered from the point.

“Nothing, so far as I can see, though I’ve thought about him now and then. He was a good workman, but what we call dour. I remember he was fastidious about his tools and grumbled at a grindstone I borrowed. One day I found him in a particularly bad humour ; he said somebody from a farm had borrowed his things to mend a gate with and had nicked them, but the farmer denied it. In the meanwhile, I stayed at Appleyard ; stayed longer than I meant, in fact, because Dick was rather in difficulties. While I was there, the boat builder wanted some copper nails, which I got from Glasgow, and we started to take them to him in the car ; but Elsie wanted to see Caerlaverock Castle, and we stopped there. It’s an interesting place.”

Whitney controlled his impatience, because he thought his comrade was following up some secondary thread that was intertwined with the story.

“Then how did the fellow get his copper nails ? ” he asked.

“Staffer took them on and came back for us, but I’m getting off the track. The ebb had been running for some time when I left Gibb’s Hole, and a nasty surf broke on the sands. There was not wind enough to account for it, but everything was harshly clear, and that’s often threatening. However, I set the big jib and topsail, because I wanted to clear the banks before the flood tide made. It runs from four to six knots an hour among the Solway shoals, and there’s some risk of knocking the boat’s bilges in if you get aground. The breeze fell light, and near dusk I came round and stood inshore on the port tack, so I could, if necessary, slip back into Rough Firth, because the Scotch channel of the Solway is no place to run for on a dirty night.

“When I got down to Abbey Head the swell was growing steep and the sea looked ragged where it cut the horizon, which showed there was wind out there. The shooting-punt I was towing was a drag, and I

didn't make much progress until a smart south-westerly breeze sprang up soon after dark. I could just lay my course down the coast, and hung on to big jib and topsail while I could. With two or three hours of that wind I'd be able to run in behind the Ross, which you see ahead. Then the breeze freshened suddenly and she listed over until most of her lee deck was in the water. For a time after that I had my hands full."

"So I imagine," Whitney remarked. "I've seen a big jib give two men trouble when they had to take it in, and you were alone and had the topsail up. I'm not surprised that you got wrecked."

"I wasn't wrecked just then. In fact, I made her snug, with two reefs in the mainsail, and lighted the compass binnacle. The trouble was that the wind was drawing ahead and the night had turned very dark. I couldn't get a glimpse of the coast, and it wouldn't have been wise to run back yet. There's a light on Hestan Island, but I wouldn't have found water enough across the sands in Rough Firth. She'd have gone down at her anchor if I'd brought up to wait.

"Well, I ate some sandwiches I had ready, and stood on. She was plunging wildly and putting her storm-jib into the sea that was getting up, but she was an able boat, and the punt towed pretty well when I'd made an extra rope fast to her."

"You wouldn't find that easy," Whitney suggested as he pictured the lonely man's struggle to haul up the heavy craft while the yacht he must relinquish control of rolled with thrashing canvas athwart the combers.

"I let the *Arrow* come up and dropped the peak. The worst was that I had to lean right out with both hands on the punt while I made the second rope fast, and nearly went overboard when she lurched. I made it fast, but when we went on I got a shock, for the water was washing up from under the cockpit floor. You see, as she'd shipped two or three combers, I'd thought it was washing down."

"The floorings would be nearly two feet above her bottom planks," Whitney said.

"They were. It meant she was leaking hard, and I'll own that rather staggered me, because she'd always been a remarkably tight craft; but I hove her to again, lighted the cabin lamp, and pulled up the floorings. This wasn't easy, because they were closely fitted and the carpenter had nailed one or two down. I can't tell you why he did so, but I tore my hand before I got them loose. You can understand that I had to be quick. She wouldn't lie to well with nobody at the helm, and kept forging up head to wind and falling off again. The way she lurched about threw me against the lockers and once or twice I heard a sea come on board. Well, there was too much water for me to find where it was coming in, and when I crawled out and tried the pump it wouldn't draw, so I went back and felt for the bottom of its pipe. There was a suction-box at the end, and it seemed to have some shavings inside. The carpenter must have thrown them under the floor."

"Rather a curious place to put them!" Whitney commented. "I suppose a shaving had stuck under a valve and stopped the pump. But, as you'd have a grid on the suction-box, how did they get in?"

"I've never found out, but I'd like to meet that carpenter," Andrew replied.

Then he felt for his pipe and lighted it, and Whitney had to prompt him before he resumed:

"Things didn't look hopeful. It was blowing hard, she was leaking fast, and I couldn't pump her out. I had to make the Ross while she kept afloat, and thought about cutting the punt adrift, but it seemed a waste, and afterwards I was glad I didn't. As it was a dead beat to windward, speed was important, and the only thing was to keep her sailing hard and let the seas come on board. There was so much spray flying that I couldn't see the punt astern, but shooting punts

are decked nearly all over, and the drag on the tow-lines showed that she was there. Then the old boat began to get sluggish, and it made me savage. She'd brought me through many a stiff blow, and I was fond of her. The Ross light was getting brighter, but a sea that came over the coaming washed out the binnacle lamp when I was ready to make the Sound. If I'd been able to take the light's bearing and look at the chart, I might have sailed her in.

"Well, with the compass gone, I had to run for it blind, and she was so waterlogged that she would hardly steer. By and by she stopped with a shock that threw me from the helm. What had happened was plain, and when the next sea washed over her I pulled up the punt, cut the lines, and fell into the well. She swung away on top of a comber, and I wondered where she'd take me, because there were crags about and the paddles had washed overboard. She was full and waterlogged, but I lay along the deck and she kept right side up until we came ashore on a bank of shingle. Rocks ran up behind it, and there was a gully I couldn't get across at the end of the cove. I pulled the punt up, and spent the night lying behind her out of the wind when I wasn't tramping about the shingle to keep myself warm, and a coastguard showed me a way up the cliff in the early morning. When I came back later there was no sign of the *Arrow*."

Andrew stopped, and for some minutes the silence was only broken by the rustle of the flapping topsail and the soft splash at the bows. It had grown dark and the sea was faintly phosphorescent; pale blue and green spangles glimmered down the wake. The Ross Island had faded into the black head behind it, but a bright beam of light glittered across the water.

"On the face of it, the reason you were wrecked is obvious," Whitney said. "The boat began to strain when she was pounding, over-pressed with sail, through a steep head sea, and you couldn't pump her out.

Besides, as she'd just been hauled up for repairs, a butt may have got started by the hammering or a seam have been left open."

"The carpenter was a good workman," Andrew quietly replied.

"He may have neglected something, for all that. Boats will leak when they're driven hard, pumps get out of order, and a stranger might nail down a floor board you kept loose; the curious point is that all these things should happen together." Whitney paused and smiled. "Of course, if you had some dangerous secret or were heir to a great estate that somebody else wanted, one might suggest a melodramatic explanation."

"I've no secret anybody would give twopence for, and inherit nothing except a very small annuity."

"Then you'll have to put the series of accidents down to coincidence. Where were you bound for when you came to grief?"

Andrew glanced back towards a stretch of water that still shone faintly among the shadowy hills.

"Up yonder, near the head of Wigtown Bay, to shoot geese. Dick was to come on by train and join me. He's fond of wildfowling, and I took advantage of it to get him away."

"Away from what?"

Andrew hesitated. "Well, you see, he was inclined to go the pace, and Staffer had some friends at Appleyard just then; clever, amusing men-about-town, who were fond of cards and knew all about the turf. Dick, who tried to play up to them, was losing a good deal of money and drinking rather more than was good for him."

"And his stepfather encouraged his extravagance?"

"Oh, no. Staffer gave him good advice, in a cynical, witty way; told him he must pull up because the pace was too hot for a lad. I never quite liked the man, but one must be fair, and he was willing to let me

take Dick. In fact, he agreed it was the best thing to do."

"But as it turned out, you didn't take him. Were you much at Appleyard afterwards?"

"No. One of Staffer's friends offered me a pretty good post abroad, and everybody thought I ought to seize the chance, but I didn't. In consequence, a kind of coolness grew up and I haven't stayed long at Appleyard since. Dick sends a message and Elsie writes long letters now and then."

Whitney stood up and stretched himself. A rhythmic throb of engines stole out of the silence, and, some distance off, a yellow and a green light moved across the level sea. Overhead, the topsail cut black against the sky, and the water had grown more luminous in the eddying wake. To the east, a thin, silver moon was shining above the dim heights of Cumberland. Tiny ripples lapped the *Rowan's* side, but the breeze was faint and everything was still.

"The flood will take us to Rough Firth, and we may as well stand on," Andrew said. "You can go below. I'll call you if you're wanted."

Carefully lowering his head, Whitney crept into the small cabin and lighted the lamp. Its illumination showed the oilskins swinging against the forecastle bulkhead, and the narrow table on top of the centre-board trunk, which ran up the middle of the floor. On each side were lockers that served as seats, and two folding cots were strapped against the skin of the boat. Whitney let one down and got into it with his clothes on, which he had found was prudent when cruising in small vessels. There was a rack, loaded with odds and ends, a few inches above his head, and a smell of tarred rope, paraffin and mildewed canvas came out of the forecastle, but this did not trouble him, and he was soon asleep. In the meanwhile, Andrew sat at the helm, his mind busy with gloomy thoughts.

CHAPTER IV.

APPLEYARD.

IT was a stormy evening when Whitney caught his first glimpse of Appleyard from the smoothly-running car, and felt disappointed. He had expected to see an ancient Border tower with modern additions, but the low, straight-fronted house did not look much more than a century old. It was solidly built of grey granite, with mullioned windows and a small pepper-box turret at one end, but while it made no pretence of architectural beauty, Whitney admitted that it had some charm. For one thing, Appleyard stood boldly on the breast of a knoll, with dark firs packed close about it, and the landscape it commanded was ruggedly wild. Bleak pastures, and lonely moorland, stained a purple-red, rolled back to the hills that melted into leaden cloud in the north. To the south, a strip of green littoral was dotted with white farmsteads and traversed by the curves of a river that flashed where it caught the light.

Beyond this level strip, the Solway sands ran far out to sea, glowing red in the angry sunset and pierced by channels of slate-green water. In the distance, a narrow white line showed where their edge was washed by the receding tide. On the western shore of the wide estuary, Criffell's lonely height stood out, coloured a harsh dark-blue, against a saffron glare.

Then the car sped across an iron bridge spanning a ravine where hazel, mountain-ash and scrub oak grew among the stones, skirted a broad lawn, and stopped at the door. Whitney got out and Andrew presented him to Mrs. Woodhouse and Staffer, who welcomed him cordially, after which he shook hands with Dick, whom he felt he would like, but they entered the house at once, and he could not see anybody very well. He stood in a square hall, which looked older than the

rest of the building, and the light was dim, for the windows were narrow and placed unusually high in the massive walls. The place felt chilly, though it was August and a wood fire burned in the big, old-fashioned hearth, but before Whitney could look about much Dick took them up a staircase that led to a gallery at the back of the hall.

“Your kit arrived from Glasgow, and I think you’ll find all you want laid out in your rooms,” he said, turning to Whitney with a chuckle. “You were wise in not bringing your shore outfit round in the boat, and if you don’t mind my saying so, you’re both tidier than I expected. You see, I know how Andrew lives on board. That leads one to believe you’ll be hungry, and dinner will be ready as soon as you have changed.”

They went along a passage, and Whitney was glad to be left alone in his room. It was his first visit to an old Scottish house, and although not an antiquarian, he was capable of receiving impressions from places, and wanted to discover what influence Appleyard had on him. He noted that a fire was laid ready in the grate, although until that morning the weather had been warm, and that there was no artificial light. The room was rather bare, but the few articles of old-fashioned furniture were solid and made on a good model. They were marked by a certain austerity of taste, and he thought of them as business-like. The plain, self-coloured rugs and curtains had a similar effect. Everything that utility demanded was there, but he marked the absence of luxury and ornament.

The walls were very thick, and there were seats in the deep window recesses. Opening one of the casements, he stopped a minute and looked out. He could see a stretch of wet sands that were now growing dim, and the faint line of surf, and then, by turning sharply, black hills running back into gathering cloud. The air was unusually keen, and although darkness was fast coming on, the distance was clean-cut and sharp.

Then Whitney began to dress, telling himself that he had got the feel of the place. He had once spent a month in the south of England, and knew his own country pretty well, but Appleyard had nothing in common with either. The landscape somehow harmonized with the house, and was perhaps a trifle harsh, but had a peculiar distinctive character. He supposed this was Scottish, and found it bracing. He had, however, trouble with a new tie he had bought in Glasgow, and Andrew, who came in and found him not ready, went down first.

There was nobody in the hall when Andrew reached it, and he was satisfied to be alone as he stood by the hearth, looking about. A lamp had been lighted, but the illumination did not carry far, and the high roof and corners were shadowy. The hall occupied the lower storey of the old central tower, which had served as fort in bygone years, but had since been partly rebuilt and incorporated in the house. Andrew knew its history, for he loved Appleyard, and was, in some respects, truer to the type of the men who had built and fought for it than Dick. He was not jealous of his cousin, but it was hard to feel himself a mere passing guest in the old house, and a vague discontent tempered his satisfaction at coming home. Besides, he was poor, and condemned by an accident to a life of obscurity. Then he wondered why Elsie had not been there to welcome him, as she had always done on previous visits, and remembered her frank regret when he last went away.

Indeed, he had often pictured her as she stood by the lodge gate, a slender, fresh-faced girl with ruffled hair and a hint of tears in her blue eyes. She was graceful as a fawn, but her beauty was immature. Somehow, one did not think of Elsie as pretty; that did not matter, it was not her real charm.

"I'm sorry you are going," she told him. "We've been friends so long, you know, and I liked to feel that you were here when things went wrong."

"I'm coming back," he answered. "If you ever really need me, I'll start home at once."

"I know you would," she said, trying to smile. "Still, of course, I won't send for you, and when you do come back it won't be the same."

By and by he looked up at a sound and saw a girl coming down the stairs. She stood out against the dark-panelled walls, for her dress, which was pale green, caught the light and shimmered. It went well with her red hair, emphasized the pure white and pink of her skin, and matched her eyes, which had the changing colour of the sea. The immature grace Andrew had known had gone; there was something of distinction in her carriage, and he was conscious of a curious disturbing shock at the change. While he gazed at her with knitted brows, she came towards him with a frank smile of pleasure.

"It's very nice to have you back, and I'm sorry I couldn't get home until a few minutes after you arrived," she said. "Roy lost a shoe as I was driving up the Lockerbie road."

Andrew took her hand and held it for a moment, but the only remark he could think of was: "You have Roy yet?"

Elsie laughed as if she understood, and rather liked, his embarrassment. "Oh, yes. He's still going strong, and when Kevan re-shod him he brought me home in record time. But you're very brown and looking well." She hesitated a moment before she asked: "Can you walk any better?"

"Not much," he answered quietly; "I don't think I ever will. The broken bone gives trouble in damp weather and I hirple when I'm tired. Anyway, we won't talk about that; it's enough to know I'm back at Appleyard."

"Then you're still very fond of it. So am I, though I sometimes feel that's curious, because I'm really an outsider."

"No," said Andrew. "The old place wouldn't be the same without you ; but what you said applies to me as well as you."

Elsie looked at him as he stood, gravely quiet, studying her. "Well," she said, "Appleyard is Dick's. His father was a true Johnstone, his mother a Jardine, but you make one feel that you're more at home here than he is. I can't account for it. Can you ?"

"I might blame your imagination," he answered, smiling. "Anyhow, it's of no importance ; I *am* an outsider."

"Very well ; we won't quarrel about it. But you haven't told me how I'm looking, and perhaps you don't realize that this dress, which was made in Paris, was put on in your honour."

"You're rather wonderful," Andrew said gravely. "But then you always were. For all that, I got a shock when you came downstairs."

Elsie's eyes twinkled, and he thought they looked like the sea when the sun touched it in a breeze. "A surface change ; Munich and London account for it. I'd run wild, you know, when you saw me last ; but there's no difference underneath. You're the same, too, and that's what I like. I want to keep my old friend. You must promise you won't alter."

"I'll try not to," he answered. "Perhaps I'm incapable of it ; I'm not progressive. Still, there are times when I feel rather old."

"Oh ! I know," she told him, with understanding sympathy. "But after the cheerful letters you wrote from Canada, I had hoped the lameness didn't trouble you very much."

"One mustn't grumble, though it's rather hard to feel useless—just now."

Elsie's face grew thoughtful. "Yes ; that must hurt. I've felt that we don't realize the seriousness of the great struggle here. It's easy to subscribe to funds and go on committees, but that kind of service leaves you

cold, and we haven't practised much self-denial at Appleyard. I was glad Dick wanted to enlist, though they wouldn't have him; but he'll tell you about it himself."

"It isn't always easy to subscribe," Andrew remarked dryly, and stopped, as Mrs. Woodhouse and Whitney came towards him, with Dick close behind. Dick was not unlike Andrew, but it was as if his cousin's prominent characteristics had been watered down. Although the handsomer of the two, he somehow looked a feeble copy of Andrew when they were together. He had twinkling eyes and a humorous way of regarding things, but his face was weak. His figure was light, well-poised and athletic, but his colour was unusually high, and on close study he showed signs of bad health.

When he had spoken a few words to Andrew they went in to dinner, which was served in a comfortable modern room, and during the meal Whitney devoted some attention to the company. One of the differences between him and his comrade was that he was most capable at managing people, and Andrew in handling things. The latter knew all about a boat and a gun, and could be relied upon to deal with contrary tides and dangerous shoals, but he was less acquainted with the intricacies of human nature.

Whitney dismissed Dick as not counting; Elsie he reserved for future study, and the two guests, who were going away in a few days, did not occupy him long. They were well-bred, well-informed men, such as one might meet anywhere. Mrs. Woodhouse had more interest, because he found her baffling. She was rather fat, with regular features but an expressionless face, eyes of light china-blue, and flat, flaxen hair. She answered his remarks with conventional politeness, but he could not, as he thought of it, strike a spark from her. He could not tell if she was reserved or merely dull. Her brother, Staffer, was of very different stamp. His face was clean-cut and intellectual, his manners were

polished but easy, and Whitney had no trouble in placing him as a man who knew the world. Indeed, since there was a hint of force and command about him, Whitney wondered why he was, so to speak, vegetating in the Scottish wilds. Staffer clearly belonged to the busy cities and centres of action. Then there was a white-haired lady with a piercing look who seldom spoke.

Nothing that he thought worth noting occurred at dinner, except that Dick, who talked at large with whimsical wit, drank a good deal of wine, and that Elsie watched him with half-veiled disturbance. Whitney thought her attitude was protective and motherly; she would have interfered had it been possible. This suggested that a supposition of Andrew's was wrong. A girl like that would not marry a man whom she must guide and control.

By and by they went back to the hall, and Andrew found a quiet corner, hoping he might get a few minutes alone, for his meeting with Elsie had had a disturbing effect. When he last went away, she had told him that when he came back things would not be the same, and he recognized the truth of this. The girl who had treated him as a trusted elder brother had grown into a beautiful, accomplished woman. Indeed, she had, so to speak, left him behind. She was cleverer and more composed than he was; she grasped things at once while he clumsily searched for their meaning. The old frank confidence and comradeship were no longer possible, but in essentials she had not changed. The world could never spoil Elsie's freshness nor blunt her keen honesty.

After a time she found him out and sat down near where he stood in the shadowy recess of the great hearth.

"I believe you were trying to hide, and we must have a talk," she said. "I'm half afraid I brought you home from Canada."

"No," said Andrew awkwardly ; " anyhow, not altogether. I felt I ought to come back, even if there's nothing I can do. Still, of course, if I can be of help here——"

Elsie's eyes were soft as she looked at him. " Yes, I know ; you're a good friend, Andrew, but I was alarmed when I wrote. After what the army doctors told him, Dick went to see a specialist in Harley Street, and must have got a plain warning because he was depressed and quiet for some time. Things are serious when Dick's cast down."

" Do you know what the doctor said ? "

" I don't ; Dick wouldn't tell me. I'm not sure that he told Uncle Arnold much."

" Ah ! " said Andrew, for Staffer's name was Arnold. " I suppose Dick had got out of hand again. Has he been indulging in any new rashness since ? "

" No, nothing fresh, but as he tried to borrow money a week after he got his allowance, which is large now, it looked ominous, and I'm afraid he's heavily in debt." Then her colour got higher as she continued : " I've seen him quite unsteady at lunch ; and the worst is that it's telling on his health."

" Looks bad ; I must see what I can do. But it's awkward, because Staffer's really responsible for him. Has he tried to pull Dick up ? "

" Yes, in a way," Elsie answered, with a thoughtful air. " Still, I don't think it disturbs him as it ought when he sees he hasn't done much good. You know he's witty when he should be firm—and I've sometimes imagined that Dick feels rather flattered than ashamed after the talk."

" I think I understand," Andrew remarked. " He really needs kicking for being fool enough to imagine he can copy Staffer."

" Then couldn't you take him away for a time in the boat ? "

" I'll try, but he's not fond of sailing. Then it's

a delicate matter, but if one could make Staffer understand——”

Elsie gave him a steady look. “No ; I think you had better not. Uncle Arnold’s very kind ; mother and I owe him a good deal, and he likes Dick. For all that, he doesn’t seem to feel it’s his duty to take much trouble——”

Andrew saw she had not said all she thought, but he answered : “Very well, I must try to find a way. And now, how have things been going since I left ? ”

“Well, I think. You will see the new vinery and the horses. Then perhaps you noticed the car you came in.”

“I did ; very powerful and beautifully fitted. Those makers do nothing but the best work at the highest price. Was it bought with Dick’s money ? ”

“No,” said Elsie in a thoughtful tone, “it’s Uncle Arnold’s car, but I understand he shares the expense of keeping the horses with Dick. Mackellar, no doubt, agreed.”

Andrew knew what she thought. The estate was in the hands of trustees until Dick came of age, but Staffer managed it, and Andrew understood that he had done so with scrupulous honesty.

“He must have made some lucky speculations,” he remarked. “I remember he used to have dealings on the Stock Exchange, and Staffer’s judgment and nerve are good.”

“I daresay that explains it,” Elsie agreed, and they talked of other matters until she left him. Soon afterwards, Dick came up, and they went into the empty smoking-room, where Andrew gave the lad a friendly look. “You strike me as not being quite up to the mark.”

“Do I ? ” Dick asked with a grin. “Your methods were always pretty obvious, and you’ve been talking to Elsie.”

“I have, and I’m sorry to hear the doctors didn’t think you very well. Hadn’t you better tell me about it ? ”

“I suppose I must. You’re a persistent fellow,

but you don't often take the superior moral tone. Well, as I'd been in the officers' training corps, I applied for a commission, and they sent me up to a medical board. One doctor asked me some catchy questions, and, being quite inexperienced, I fell into the trap. The consequence was I didn't pass."

"You didn't learn much about yourself from him?"

"I did not. It was he who got the information; but when he'd done he offered me a scrap of advice—I'd better see a private doctor at once."

"Did you?"

Dick chuckled. "No. Instead, I went up to London and tried to join one of the special battalions. I was wiser this time, and told their medical examiner nothing I could help. Thought I'd made a good impression, but at length he looked at me pretty hard. 'I admire your keenness, but you won't do,' he said. I told him I was a bit off colour, but I'd play golf all day and drink nothing but soda-water, and then come back in a month. 'It would be of no use; I'd go to Harley Street now,' he said."

"I hope you did," Andrew remarked, with a frown.

Dick lighted a cigarette. "Yes; I went. I'll spare you technicalities, and, for that matter, I've forgotten them, but, after all, I didn't get much of a shock. It seems my heart's gone rocky."

"Go on," said Andrew.

"Well, if I give up everything I like and live like an ascetic, I may get over the trouble, though I think the fellow doubted it. On the other hand, I may get worse and drop off suddenly."

"Unless you steady down."

"Yes," said Dick; "he hinted something of the kind."

Andrew said nothing for a few moments. He was fond of his cousin, and had promised Dick's father to look after him. What he had just heard had given him a shock, but it had not been altogether unexpected. He felt he had been neglectful, and wished he had more

tact. He had a duty to the reckless lad, and did not know how to discharge it.

"Then the proper course is obvious," he remarked. "Suppose you come down the Galloway coast with Whitney and me? It's early for the black geese, but there are ducks about."

Dick looked at him with a smile. "Unfortunately, I'm not keen on sailing, and while shooting's good enough, living on board a small, damp boat gets monotonous. Now if you would land me where one could get a game of cards in the evening, or——"

"Where they had a bar?"

"Yes; that is what I meant. A bar with a fetching girl in it."

"It wouldn't work," said Andrew firmly. "I remembered what happened when I landed you at Douglas, and a poaching escapade with some Creetown quarrymen on the same cruise. You have a talent for getting into trouble. However, if you won't come with me, I'll have to make Appleyard my headquarters for a time."

"I hope you will; you're a very good sort," Dick replied, with feeling. "Has it ever struck you that Appleyard might be yours?"

Andrew's face grew stern. "That won't bear speaking of. Appleyard belongs to you and, what's more, you belong to it. It's your duty to pull yourself together and take care of the estate, to marry and bring up your children to be a credit to your name. Instead, you're dragging it in the dirt, making shabby betting men and turf sharpeners your friends, and, I'm half afraid, getting into speculative money-lenders' hands."

Dick winced and Andrew saw his random shot had scored. "If you're in difficulties, I might raise a hundred pounds or so," he resumed. "If, as I expect, it isn't half enough, we'll go and see Mackellar before you get in too deep."

Mackellar was the acting executor of Dick's father's

will, and there was something that puzzled Andrew in the lad's expression, but he answered, "I'll think over it."

"Very well. Did you tell Staffer what the doctor said?"

"I wasn't quite as frank with him as I've been with you; one isn't proud of being a lame duck. Still, I imagine he has a pretty accurate notion of how things are with me."

"Then he ought to pull you up; he has the power."

"That's doubtful," Dick answered, with a grin. "I don't think you're quite fair to Staffer. He's given me lots of good advice, and treats me very well. I might have got a stepfather of a very different kind."

"It might have been better if you had," Andrew dryly rejoined.

Dick flushed. "I wish you'd leave Staffer alone; I won't have him run down."

"I didn't mean to run him down."

"Well," said Dick, with a shrewd glance, "perhaps you didn't consciously. You'd try to conquer your prejudices, but you're antagonistic."

"Sometimes you're keener than you look. But I have wondered how Staffer feels about me."

"Then you won't find out," Dick answered. "I suppose he has his failings, but he never gives himself away. However, we had better go back to the others."

The party broke up soon afterwards, but when Andrew went to his room he sat for some time with a thoughtful frown.

CHAPTER V.

SWEETHEART ABBEY.

SOON after their arrival Whitney and Andrew drove back to the boat, which was moored in the mouth of a stream at some distance from Appleyard. It was a bright morning and they sat smoking in the cockpit when they had shaken loose

some of the canvas and laid their sea clothes and blankets out to dry.

Behind the white beach, a strip of marish heath led back to a broad belt of cultivated land, with neat farmsteads scattered about; in front, the narrow channel, in which the shallow-bodied boat lay nearly upright, wound seaward through a great stretch of sand. The open sea was not visible, but three or four miles away a glistening streak that seemed to be in motion caught the light. In the middle distance, a green lagoon and two ribands of water were rapidly widening. Flocks of black and white oyster-catchers fluttered about the banks of the channels, and long rows of salmon nets ran back along the shore.

"This is a curious place to navigate," Whitney remarked. "I allow you were right in insisting on shallow draught and a centreboard."

"I imagine it's unique, but the shoals are not the worst. The tide runs up these gutters very fast, and, as a rule, you can't take out an anchor if you get aground."

"But that's the first thing one generally does."

"It's dangerous here. If the anchor held until she floated on the flood tide, the strain on the cable would probably pull her down. If it didn't hold, which is much more likely, it would check her while she drove across the bank, sheering athwart the stream, in danger of rolling over. The safest plan is to keep all sail set and try to make for deep water as soon as she floats."

Whitney glanced at the nearest channel. A small white ridge, perhaps six inches high, stretched from bank to bank, moving forward about as fast as one could walk, and as the wave passed on the riband of water changed into a lake. He thought it would be unpleasant to meet the advancing tide at some distance from the land, but, on looking round, saw a man walking towards them across the bank. The fellow was old and his brown face was deeply lined. He

wore a yellow oilskin cap, an old blue jersey, and rubber waders that reached up his thighs. Clambering on board, he nodded to Andrew.

"Weel," he said, "I'm glad to see ye back, an' it's a bonny wee boat ye have got."

"She's not bad for work among the shoals, but she's not the best type for the long seas you get in open water," Andrew replied, and turned to Whitney. "You might bring up the bottle in the port locker, Jim, and the soda."

"Ye can let the sodda bide; I've nae use for 't," said the man, who filled his glass when Whitney returned. "Here's til ye an' her! Ye have given her a right name."

"Why's the name good? What is a Rowan, anyway?" Whitney asked.

"The mountain ash. The old mosstroopers sometimes wore a spray in their steel caps as a protection against witchcraft and bad luck. We're descendants of the Norse pirates and the ash was the Scandinavians' sacred Ysdragil, the tree of life."

"You're a curious lot," Whitney remarked. "I guess our beachcombers don't know much about archæology; they don't have superstitions a thousand years old."

"Were ye thinking o' making a trip to the deep water doon wast?" the fisherman resumed.

"I don't know yet. We might do some shooting here. Is there much fowl about?"

"Ye'll get shellduck noo, an' a few teal; whaups, too, if ye're wanting them, but the lag-geese an' the bernicle are no' here yet." He paused and added: "I wouldna' say but it might be better if ye bide until they come."

Andrew looked hard at him. "Why?"

"I'm thinking ye're wanted here. It would be an ill thing to see Appleyard gang doon, and it might be yours some day."

"It's my cousin's, and he's younger than I am," Andrew answered with a frown.

"Just that! Ye're leal we ken. Weel, as ye're fond o' the young laird, it might be wiser to keep an eye on him. He's over much under yon foreigner's thumb."

"How's the fishing?" Andrew asked pointedly.

The old fellow broke into a slow chuckle. "It might be better an' it might be waur; there's ower many o' the Board's watchers here awa' for my liking. An' noo, I'll need to win ashore before the tide's on the bank."

He went off across the sands and Whitney turned to Andrew with a smile. "You folks leave a good deal to the imagination, but, so far as I could understand him, he gave you a hint or two. What's his business?"

"Salmon-fishing with the drift net. I've known Jock Marshall since I was a boy and believe he takes a well-meaning interest in me."

"Why did he call Staffer a foreigner?"

"In a sense, he is a foreigner, although he's been a naturalized British subject for some time. We knew nothing about him until he married Dick's mother, but there's reason to believe his name used to be Von Stauffer, or something like it. Mrs. Woodhouse was born in Austria, but she came over young, and her husband was all right. His family is well known, though he didn't leave her much."

"Well, what about to-morrow?"

"If the breeze holds, we'll have no trouble in crossing the sands to New Abbey. Elsie and Dick will come, and I expect you'll enjoy the trip. It's an interesting place."

As they stowed the sails the boat suddenly rose upright, drifted a few yards, and was then brought up with a jar of tightening cable while the tide splashed against her planks. Launching the light dinghy, they paddled shorewards with the stream.

At high-water next day they went back on board and the *Rowan* stood out across the sands. Elsie sat

at the tiller, while Andrew sounded with a long boat-hook, and Dick lounged in the cockpit, smoking a cigarette. He laughed and told humorous stories, but Whitney noticed that Elsie was intent upon her steering. He had expected this, for he thought whatever the girl undertook would be well done, but she did not obtrude her earnestness. Now and then she glanced at Andrew as he dipped the pole and a nod or gesture was exchanged. He was feeling his way across the shoals with half-instinctive skill and the girl understood what he wished her to do. Whitney thought they worked together very well, because their task was not an easy one. There was only a foot or two of water under the boat and she forged ahead fast through the short seas the tide made as it raced across the banks.

The seas began to curl as the ebb met the freshening wind, and little showers of spray splashed into the straining canvas. The deck got wet; the water was filled with sand and streaked with foam. There was no mark in all the glittering stretch, but Andrew knew when he reached the main channel, and told Whitney to let the centreboard down. Then they went to windward faster; the sea hurrying westwards with them in confused eddies, while small white combers foamed about the boat. She plunged through them, scooping their broken crests on board, and by and by the water ahead grew yellow and marked by frothy lines. Elsie looked at Andrew, who took out his watch.

"We ought to get a fathom most of the way across," he said and turned to Whitney. "You might stand by below to pull up the board."

Whitney crept into the low-roofed cabin, where he sat on a locker with the tackle that lifted the heavy iron centreplate in his hand. He imagined that it would be desirable to heave it up as soon as possible after he got the order. From where he sat he could see nothing outside the boat, but as he looked aft through the hatch he was offered a fascinating picture,

A strip of the tanned mainsail, shining ruby-red, cut against a patch of clear blue sky, and Elsie sat beneath it, her gracefully lined figure swaying easily as the boat rose and fell. She leaned on the long tiller and a lock of loosened hair that shone like the sail fluttered across her forehead. Her eyes were bright, and there was a fine colour in her face, but it was not so much her beauty as her decision and confidence that Whitney liked. The girl was capable of keen enjoyment, but it must be in something that was worth doing. He was already conscious of a curious respect for Elsie Woodhouse, but he did not mean to fall in love with her. She was not for him, though he did not think she would marry Dick.

After a time, Andrew told him to lift the board and come up, and going on deck he saw a long, hump-backed mountain that rose abruptly from a narrow strip of rolling pasture close ahead. A row of very small white houses bordered a green common behind the beach, and the tide swept, froth-streaked, down the channel in front.

"You didn't touch, though I guess there wasn't much water under us," he remarked. "Where do we bring up?"

"In the Carsethorn gut," said Andrew. "Do you think you can find it, Elsie?"

"I'll try. Give her a foot or two of sheet."

The boat swung round a little, edging in towards the beach, and Whitney saw by the ripples that they were in shallow water. Andrew let the staysail run down, but when he stood ready with the boathook, Elsie smiled.

"Sound if you like, but you won't find bottom here," she said.

"A good shot. You have hit the mouth of the gut."

"You'll touch now," said Elsie a few minutes later, and Andrew, who dipped the pole, threw it down and lowered the jib. Then the boat came round head to

wind, and the anchor went down with a rattle of running chain.

Landing from the dinghy, they struck across the fields, and although it was autumn, Whitney wondered at the lush greenness of the grass. Close on their left hand, Criffell's lonely ridge ran up against the sky, coloured purple-red, though the hollows in its curving side were filled with dark-blue shadow. The ash-trees in the hedgerows that crossed the rolling pasture obscured their view ahead, and they were crossing the last rise when Whitney stopped.

"This is worth coming a very long way to see!" he exclaimed.

A deep glen, where the light was subdued and the colours dim, cleft the mountain's northern flank, and at its mouth a cluster of white houses stood among the trees; then on a narrow green level, bright in the sun, the old abbey shone rosy red. Ancient ash-trees and crumbling granite walls straggled about it, but the moulding of the high, east window, buttress and tower, still rose in lines of beauty, worked in warm-coloured stone.

Elsie gave him a quick look and he knew she was pleased with his frank admiration, while when they entered the cool, shadowy interior she acted as his guide, for Dick and Andrew stayed outside in the sun. By and by she stopped near the east end of the building, and Whitney looked back down the long rows of plinths, from which the pillars had fallen, and up into the hollow of the great ruined tower.

"It must have been a wonderful place in the old days; a jewel in the shape of a church, and I expect if they'd searched Scotland they wouldn't have found a finer setting than these rich meadows at the mountain's foot," he said, and smiled. "Somehow, I think that's right, because it makes one think of a well-cut precious stone."

Elsie led him a few yards along a wall, over which a low, groined roof still hung.

"Its building was a labour of love and perhaps that's why it never leaves one cold. With a few exceptions, our northern abbeys are austere and stern," she said, and indicated a slab of weathered stone that bore half-obliterated carving. "This is obviously the Lady chapel, and the Countess lies here—'On the priest's left hand as he turns towards the people.' That, of course, is the south side of the church; in olden times, they avoided the other. I suppose you know its history."

"I only know it's called Sweetheart Abbey."

"Yes; the church of the *dulce cor*. The Countess Devorgilla built it as a shrine for her husband's heart, which was embalmed and buried on her breast. It's a moving story, when one thinks of what she undertook. Galloway was then, for the most part, a savage waste; skilled workmen must be brought from somewhere else, perhaps from Italy or France. Then there is only granite, which could not be cut and moulded, on these hills, and the soft red stone had to be carried down the Firth and across the sands. They had no mechanical transport, and you can see the size of the blocks. In spite of all this, the abbey rose and still stands, marked, I often think, by a tender, elusive beauty that's peculiar to the North."

"It's great," said Whitney quietly, taking off his hat. "I'm beginning to understand what you mean, though I don't know the North well, yet. It's dark, and hard as granite in some respects, but you get glimpses of a soft brightness that flashes out and vanishes like the sunshine in the mist, on your mountain sides. Well, we modern folk are a matter-of-fact lot, but I guess the world of romance is all round us and the dividing wall is thin. It mayn't be meant to keep us out, and one remembers your English song: 'If you but touch with your finger tips, the ivory gate and golden——' "

Elsie gave him an appreciative glance, but she moved

back to where the sun shone down into the roofless nave, and Whitney thought he understood why she did so. Her imagination was fastidiously refined ; she would not loiter talking by Devorgilla's tomb. Standing silent beside her, he waited, with a faint smile. He was not a sentimentalist trying to play up to a pretty girl ; somehow, she had stirred him. He felt she had the gift of seizing what was true in romance and missing what was false. Then she had the strange elusive beauty of the North that she had spoken of ; an ethereal tenderness that flashed out and vanished, leaving the hard rock of a character steadfast as the granite upon the Solway shore. Devorgilla, who built the abbey in spite of many difficulties, must have been made like that ; but he must pull up. After all, he had met as pretty and clever girls, and Elsie was not for him. He was getting sure of this. Then she turned and looked east with grave, steady eyes.

" Yes," she said, " you're right. One reaches out for something that's on the other side, but perhaps when one knocks and the gate is opened, one goes through unawares——"

" You mean, that when one's eyes are opened, there mayn't be much difference between the land of enchantment and ours ? "

" Something like that," she replied. " I was thinking of Devorgilla, puzzling over the builders' plans and wondering how to pay the labourers. Then of our brave lads, with aching backs and blistered hands, digging trenches in the battle line at Mons."

Whitney made a sign of understanding. " But what about the Countess's husband ? What was he famous for ? "

" I don't know anything about him," Elsie answered, with a smile.

" Then you see how plans miscarry. Devorgilla built this abbey in his honour, but it will stand as her memorial until the last stone crumbles down."

"That is true. Her deed lives, but one must conclude that the man who inspired it had some merit. Devorgilla, as her work shows, could not have been a fool. She would not have honoured a worthless husband."

Whitney looked round the great church that was still majestic in its decay. "Well," he said, "there can't be many of us, now-a-days, who'd deserve the love and labour this place must have cost."

"But there must be some."

"It seems a big thing to claim, but I have met two or three who, so far as my judgment goes, were good enough for the kind of woman your Countess seems to have been ; not clever men and in no way remarkable, until you knew them well, but you felt that, whatever happened, they'd do the square thing. One could trust them. Somehow, one in particular stands out from the rest."

Elsie turned towards him and he saw the strange elusive tenderness shining in her eyes. Momentary as it was, it transformed her face, and he wondered whether she approved his sentiment or knew whom he meant.

"I imagine you are a good friend," she said. "It must be nice to have somebody who believes in you like that."

"If the man I'm thinking of knew how he stood with me and others, it would make him very embarrassed," Whitney answered with a laugh. "Anyhow, that's natural. It's a hard thing to feel you must live up to your reputation."

"I think I like you best when you're serious," Elsie told him, though she smiled.

"Sorry," he said. "Still, I feel I'd better come down. I generally get hurt when I try to keep up on a level I'm not used to."

She took the lead he gave her and they went back to the others, engaged in careless talk. When they reached an arch that opened on a sweep of sunny grass, Andrew looked up from the stone on which he sat.

"You haven't hurried," he remarked.

"No," said Whitney. "I've been learning some more of your traditions and they're inspiring. The folks round here seem to have been great lovers as well as pretty hard fighters."

"I'm afraid they have degenerate descendants," Andrew replied, gloomily, and Whitney, noting how he sat, imagined that his leg hurt him, as it sometimes did.

"A happy thought has struck me," Dick broke in. "It would be hot work dragging the dinghy down across a quarter of a mile of sand, and I don't feel up to carrying a heavy lunch basket. There's a hotel in the village where they'd give us something to eat and we could stroll up the burnside, afterwards. It's a pretty walk."

Whitney remarked that Andrew's glance rested for a second on Elsie's face and then passed on. She made no sign, but it looked as if Andrew understood without it, for he said, "I think not; the place would probably be full of Dumfries excursionists. It would be pleasanter on the beach."

"And I want to see the view you talked about," Whitney followed him up, and Dick broke into a resigned grin.

"Very well, but you'll drag the dinghy down yourselves."

They had to carry the boat some distance, and afterwards rowed lazily along the edge of the sand until they landed at the foot of a little glen. Here they lunched and lounged in the sun until the flood tide came softly lapping across the flats.

The breeze had fallen very light when the stream swept the *Rowan* east across the shoals, and Whitney, sitting on the cabin-top, watched the Galloway shore recede. The western sky was a pale saffron against which Criffell rose, steeped in a wonderful blue. The shadows were gathering fast about the rolling ground below, but he could still distinguish the hollow where the old red abbey stood, and thought it would long remain fixed in his memory.

CHAPTER VI.

ON CRIFFELL HILL.

THE sun burned down on the heather, in which Andrew stood waist deep with a swarm of flies buzzing round his head. Below, in the curving glen where the heath gave place to white bent-grass, a burn flashed like a silver riband among the stones; above, the long ridge of Criffell ran up against the clear blue sky. Grouse were calling as they skimmed the steep downward slope, and a curlew's wild cry fell sharply from the summit of the hill. These were sounds that Andrew delighted in, for he loved the fellside almost as he loved the sea, but his lips were set and his brows knitted.

Whitney, who had begun by offering Elsie help which he soon found she did not need, was toiling up hill beside her a short distance farther on, with Dick behind them, but seeing Andrew stop, they waited until he came up.

"It's rather steep," said Elsie. "Here's a nice flat stone; we'll rest for a few minutes."

She sat down on a slab of lichened granite and gave Andrew a sympathetic glance.

"We really came up very fast. I wanted to see what your partner was made of."

"Butter, if my sensations are any guide," Whitney answered. "In some parts of Canada, they used to sell it you in small wood-shaving baskets, and when the weather was hot you had some trouble in carrying it home. You see the moral."

"I wonder why Andrew loaded himself up with that heavy ruck-sack on a day like this?" said Dick. "However, I expect there's a pair of marine glasses and a chart, besides a parallel rule and compass, inside it. Andrew feels he'd get lost if he didn't carry the lot about when he risks himself ashore."

"There're all in," Andrew replied, rather grimly.

"Still, I'd give you five minutes to the Douglas cairn and beat you, if I'd been in proper form. It wasn't the bag that stopped me."

"I'm sorry we forced the pace, but you were going well at the bottom," Elsie said.

"I felt all right, but that's just when my weakness finds me out. Sometimes it's the damp that brings it on and sometimes the heat, but one oughtn't to grumble about not being able to climb a hill as fast as usual." He broke off and resumed after a twinge of pain: "It's thinking of our boys being rolled back on Cambrai while I loaf about the Solway shore, that worries me."

"Annandale was generally in the thick of it when there was fighting in the old days, but our branch of the leading clan is getting weedy," Dick remarked. "There are only two of us left and one has a leg that plays tricks and the other a rocky heart. The remedy seems to be the philosophic attitude; if you can't get what you like, you must like what you can get, and the latter's often better than you think. Not that I can understand any man's going to sea in a small, damp boat, when he can help it."

Elsie turned to Andrew. "The philosophic attitude's hardest when one wants to work, but sometimes when one can't have the task one chooses, another that one can do as well turns up. That sounds improving, but there's comfort in it."

"Not to me," said Dick. "Work, in itself, hasn't much charm, and if I can't get the job I like, I'm content to play about. I daresay I'm a degenerate, because my father would have highly approved of Elsie's sentiments. It's curious that while she only belongs to Appleyard, so to speak, by adoption, she has all the salient family characteristics."

"Isn't it rather presumptuous to talk about adopting Miss Woodhouse?" Whitney asked.

"Oh," said Dick, with a twinkle, "you don't take me right. We haven't adopted Elsie; she has adopted

us, and if we hadn't given her the opportunity, she'd have found somebody else to look after."

Whitney thought Dick's remark was justified. Elsie was young, but he had seen that her influence was felt at Appleyard ; she was one of the women who do not expect to be taken care of but care for others. In this lay the danger that she might, after all, marry Dick, not because she loved him, but because he needed her. Whitney frowned as he thought of it, although he liked the lad.

Then Elsie said with a laugh : " I think we're talking nonsense and Dick and Mr. Whitney had better go on to the top. I'll stay with Andrew until you come back."

Andrew rose with an effort. " I'm going."

" Can you not sit still ? " Dick asked. " Does it matter whether you get up or not ? "

" Not at all, in one way," Andrew replied, with some dryness. " Still, it's galling to feel that you can be made a prisoner by an unruly leg."

" You'll have to let him go," Dick said to Elsie. " His way of looking at these things runs in the family, though I'll own it hasn't come down in the direct line. I remember my father, who was plagued by rheumatism, standing out in the rain and mud most of one winter, when they were draining the meadows along the burn. When the doctor warned him what the consequence would be, he only said, ' Then I'll ken what I'm suffering for.' "

They went up the steep face of a pointed knoll, and afterwards followed a long ridge to the massive cairn on the top of the hill, where shallow pools gleamed among the green moss of a bog. On reaching it, Andrew sat down upon a stone, while Whitney stood close by, his eyes wandering across the wide landscape that rolled away beneath him.

To the south the sea glittered like silver and a bright arm wound inland up a valley. To the west and north a few lemon-yellow harvest fields and strips of green pasture checkered the red heath, and the smoke of

a little town hung about a hollow, but the picture's dominant tone was wild solitude. The plain rose in step-like ridges, the hillsides that bordered it were washed with shades of delicate grey, and in the distance lofty rounded summits cut against the sky.

"It looks as lonely as our western deserts," Whitney remarked. "Does anybody live there?"

"Galloway isn't populous," Andrew replied. "If you went straight ahead, as you're facing now, you'd pass no place worth mentioning until you reached Newton Stewart among those hills on the skyline, and it would take you two days to walk. After that, you could go on across the heather until you came down the water of Ayr to the Firth of Clyde. However, I want to study the Solway."

He spread a chart on a flat stone, and putting a compass on the middle of it, moved a notched brass ring round the instrument. The tide was about half ebb and broad belts of sand rose among the glistening channels in the Firth. Andrew took sights across them, and afterwards pencilled notes on the margin of the chart, but sometimes he lay still for a minute or two with the marine glasses at his eyes. The others left him alone until he rolled up the chart and lighted his pipe.

"I've learned something useful," he remarked, deprecatingly. "These channels change so fast that a chart's of no use unless you keep it up to date. This kind of thing's rather a hobby of mine."

"What's the country to the east like?" Whitney asked. "It looks high and rough, but I seem to make out a deep valley beyond your Annandale."

"Now you have set him off!" Dick exclaimed with a chuckle. "Andrew knows all about the western road to England."

"Don't mind him," said Whitney. "I'm anxious to learn."

"The road is interesting and I'll take you over it, some day. For one thing, Nature has provided a good

route through a rugged country. Beginning at the northern end near the Forth, it's an easy grade to where you cross the Lammermuirs, and then Gala water takes you gently down to the Tweed. When you leave the river near Selkirk, you push across a low ridge to the Teviot, which takes you up a steady slope to the main watershed, after which the Esk brings you down between steep hills to the Solway shore. For most of the way, the valleys are shut in by high moors, and that made Eskdale a natural sallyport for the old Border clans."

"On the whole, they were a pretty bad lot and gave the Scottish kings plenty of trouble," Dick broke in. "However, you had better let Andrew tell you about them. You needn't remember much, but it will please him."

"Selkirk was their first rallying place for an English raid; and the Flowers of the Forest, who rode there, down Ettrick, were wiped out at Flodden with the Selkirk souters. When you strike Teviot, you're in Buccleugh country, and when Buccleugh rode out through Ewes Doors, the Elliots of Esk and Liddel joined him at Langholm. They crossed the sands to Cumberland where you see the firth run out to a silver thread."

"But did the tide of invasion always flow south?"

"Generally. There were exceptions, but the English armies preferred the eastern road by Berwick or Northam. They could bring their troops up best by York and Newcastle; but Edward the first, the Hammer of the Scots, knew the advantages of the other line."

"And so did Prince Charlie," Elsie interposed.

"Another example. The English idea was always that the Berwick route must be stopped, and, no doubt, the Prince chuckled when they sent Wade's army to Newcastle. Pushing down Esk, he seized Carlisle and pressed on to Derby before Wade could march his force across. In fact, he might have reached London if his foreign staff had showed more pluck."

"All this is interesting," Whitney declared. "Antiquities are perhaps the only things we haven't got in my country; you can't manufacture them. Anyhow, I think of buying a motor bicycle and side-car that we can travel round in. But is there a moral to this historical sketch?"

"Only that history sometimes repeats itself," Andrew replied.

For a time they sat talking and looking about. There was very little wind and the murmur of the Solway tide came up to them faintly across the purple slopes where the grouse were calling. By and by, however, a young man in khaki uniform appeared, picking his way across the bog. He was hot and breathless, and seemed surprised when he saw the party, but came towards them with a smile.

"So you're back!" he said to Andrew, when he had bowed to Elsie. "I meant to look you up."

"We'll be glad to see you, Murray, and send you back in the car," Dick told him. "But what brings you up Criffell in full uniform? I must say it's a better fit than some they've been serving out lately."

Murray laughed. "We are giving the Terriers a run; but business first. I suppose you haven't seen any turf that might have been dug over recently, or stones that seemed to have been pulled up?"

"We haven't. Did you expect to find something like that?"

"To tell the truth, I don't know what I did expect to find. We're ostensibly practising scouting, but there's a batch of Dumfries cyclists scouring the Galloway roads, and I imagine the authorities have some reason for sending us out."

"I suppose if you met a foreigner or anybody with an electric battery, he'd go into the bag," Dick suggested. "After reading the newspapers, one must admit that the Terriers are remarkably good shots. In fact, it's not safe to meet them in the dark."

Elsie told him to be quiet and give Murray a cigarette, and when the latter sat down, Andrew said to him : " You imagine this turn out isn't merely a part of the men's training ? "

Murray looked thoughtful. " No ; I believe there is something going on round here. We've got orders to search the country as far as Screel of Bengairn, though, of course, that can't be done in a day, and I heard they mean to organize scouting parties in the Castle Douglas neighbourhood."

" Well, perhaps a wireless installation could be made small enough to carry about and hide ; but a good deal of Galloway's a wilderness of granite and heath."

" That's why it might prove a suitable place."

" Yes, in a way. There are glens where a man could lurk for a long time without being seen, but they're hard to reach, and nothing that the enemy would wish to learn is likely to happen here. Then the sands protect this shore. The east coast's our vulnerable point, and any important news could best be picked up about Rosyth. If there are wireless installations working, one would naturally look for them on the eastern slope of the Lamermuir and along the seaboard between Berwick and the Forth."

" Just so," agreed Murray. " No doubt, they've had that district searched, but you must remember we're dealing with remarkably clever people, who wouldn't go to work in the obvious way. Now, suppose some news was gathered about Rosyth, how long would it take a powerful car to bring it here ? "

" Four hours and a half, by the Gala water-Eskdale road, provided that none of your fellows or the police interfered."

" That's round about and you'd run through too many towns. I'd go by Symington to the head of Clyde, and then across the moors to Thornhill—a rough country, but there's nobody to bother about the speed limit."

" Well," said Andrew, thoughtfully, " I'd prefer the

other line ; the obvious way's sometimes safest. It's the unusual thing that excites suspicion."

"There's only one road for Andrew," Dick remarked with a grin, but Murray got up.

"I'm afraid we are boring you and I must be off," he said to Elsie. "My Terriers are scattered about the mosses and khaki has its disadvantages when you're looking for your men."

He turned away and when he went, springing down the western slope of the hill, Elsie looked at the others.

"It's nice to see a keen man, but I'm glad he has gone."

"That's weak, if I know what you mean," said Dick.

"I suppose it is," Elsie agreed. "Still, it was so serene up here, and he has broken the charm. The war cloud looked a long way off, but it seems closer now." She glanced across the ranges of sunny hills as she added : "What a beautiful world this might be if men were sensible and just."

"True, but then we'd miss some excitement and get fat and slack. I expect a certain amount of trouble's good for us, and that's why we make it."

"We didn't make this horrible war," Elsie rejoined.

"No," said Dick, "I suppose we didn't. As a future landowner, I've naturally no admiration for the Lloyd George gang, but one must own that they were forced into the fray. To do them justice, they're not the lot to fight when they can help it, and they're certainly getting on better than I expected."

"You were bound by the 'Scrap of paper,'" Whitney remarked.

Dick chuckled. "Our politicians have left us nothing to say about that, but I'll admit there's something convenient in the other fellows' theory. I happen to know a little about scraps of paper and there are one or two I'd be glad to disown."

"So I thought !" Andrew dryly interposed.

"Well," said Dick, "my frankness has got me into

trouble before. But perhaps we had better go back to the car."

They went down the hill, talking carelessly, but Elsie's eyes were grave when she saw in the distance small scattered figures moving across the heath. There was something ominous about the soldiers' presence on the quiet moors where the black-faced sheep had long fed undisturbed.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GREY CAR.

IT was one o'clock in the morning, but Andrew, who sat by an open window, did not feel sleepy.

This annoyed him, because he and Whitney were to make an early start for Edinburgh, but there was a reason for his wakefulness. Whitney had ordered an American motor bicycle from Glasgow, and something had gone wrong with the machine. Returning late in the afternoon from a trial run, he said he had located the trouble and would soon put it right, and when an hour's experimenting made things no better, rashly decided to take the engine down.

This was not difficult, but reassembling the greasy parts was a different matter and when dinner-time arrived, he and Andrew resolved to wait until they had finished the job. Towards the middle of the operations, both were dirty and savage, while in the end, it was Andrew who put the engine together. He did not know much about motors, but he was something of a mechanic and accustomed to grappling with difficulties, unassisted, on board his boat. It was, however, eleven o'clock when they finished, and, as sometimes happened when he had concentrated his mind upon a task, the tension did not immediately relax.

Moreover, he had something to think about, for he realized that his friendship with Elsie could not

be resumed where it had broken off. She had grown up while he was away and his feeling towards her had changed. To be regarded as a kind of elder brother no longer satisfied him, and if he was not very careful, he might find himself in love with her. This was unthinkable ; first of all because he was lame and poor, and then because it was obvious that Elsie ought to marry Dick. She had no money and Dick, who had plenty, needed her. Elsie would keep him straight and his weak heart would cease to trouble him when he steadied down. Andrew had long cherished an affection for both, and knew that Dick trusted him.

Then he reflected that Elsie's attitude to Dick was, to a large extent, protective and motherly, which was not the feeling one would expect a girl to show for the man she meant to marry ; and while Dick was obviously fond of her, his attachment, so far as one could judge, was not passionate. Besides, when one came to think of it, the suggestion that their marriage must be taken for granted had come from Staffer. He had, so to speak, delicately warned Andrew off, which his position justified his doing ; but, after all, he might be mistaken.

Andrew, however, firmly pulled himself up. He was being led away by specious arguments. It was easy to find excuses for indulging one's self and he had promised to look after Dick. If he tried to supplant his cousin in Elsie's affection, he would be doing a dishonourable thing. There was no getting over this, but it cost him an effort to face the truth.

Leaning forward, he looked out of the window. It was a calm night and not very dark, although there was no moon. He could see the firs near the house cut black against the sky, and the blurred outline of a shrubbery beside the drive to the bridge. Thin white mist rose from the ravine, and beyond it a beechwood rolled down the hill. The air was warm, and the smell of flowers and wet soil drifted into the room.

Then Andrew's wandering attention became fixed

as he heard a soft rattle of gravel down the drive, which had been raked the previous day. Rabbits sometimes got through the netting and one might have disturbed the stones as it sprang across, but Andrew rejected this explanation. The sound was too loud, although he imagined that there was something stealthy in it. Anybody coming towards the house across the smoothly-paved bridge, would step on the gravel and follow it up, because there was a flower border between the drive and shrubbery. This had a narrow grass edging, but hoops were placed along it to keep people off. The sound, however, was not repeated, and Andrew waited, expecting to hear the intruder fall over one of the hoops. He did not do so, and fixed his eyes upon the end of the shrubbery. His sight was good and presently he made out a very indistinct figure moving through the gloom beneath the firs.

This was strange. He had never heard of any house-breaking in the dale, and there was nothing at Appleyard to attract a burglar from the distant towns. It was too late for a villager to keep tryst with one of the maids, and a poacher would not cross the well-fenced grounds. Andrew decided that he would not give the alarm but opened his door quietly so that he could hear if anybody entered the house. Though he stood beside it, listening closely, he heard nothing, and returned to the window, from which he saw a dark form move back into the gloom of the trees. By and by, there was another soft rattle of gravel near the bridge, and after that deep silence except for the splash of water in the ravine. Andrew imagined that about five minutes had elapsed since he heard the first sound, but the prowler had gone and he must try to solve the puzzle in the morning. It had turned his thoughts from more serious matters and going to bed he soon fell asleep.

He got up early, and walking down the drive before anybody was about, found a fresh footprint in the flower border near the bridge. It was close to an opening

in the shrubbery by which one could reach the lawn, as if the man had meant to jump across and had fallen a few inches short. That he had not gone along the grass edging showed he knew the hoops were there.

Andrew examined the footprint. It was deep and clearly defined, and he thought it looked more like the impress of a well-made shooting boot than the heavy boots the country people wore. For one thing, he could see no marks of the tackets the Scottish peasant uses. Acting on a half understood impulse, he covered the footprint up and presently seeing the gardener come out with a rake, strolled towards him.

"You have a big place to take care of, Fergus, but you keep it very neat," he said.

"Ay," replied the other. "I'm thinking it's big enough."

"Have you help?"

"Willie Grant comes over whiles, when I've mair than ordinar' to do. He has a club foot, ye'll mind, an' is no' verra active, but there's jobs he saves me."

Andrew knew the man, who could not have sprung across the flower border.

"I see Tom is still at the stables, but the man who drives the car is new. How long have they had him?"

"A year, maybe. Watson's a quiet man, an' makes no unnecessar' mess, like some o' them. He leeves in the hoose."

"Then he doesn't get up very early."

"He's at Dumfries wi' the car. There was something to be sortit an' he took her there yestreen. Mr. Staffer's for Glasgow, the morn."

After a few remarks about the garden, Andrew strolled away. He had learned that the night prowler could not have been one of the men employed at Appleyard. The fellow had apparently not entered the house, and although he had stayed long enough to deliver a message to somebody inside, Andrew thought he would have heard a door or window opened, had he

done so. The matter puzzled him, but he determined to say nothing about it, although he was conscious of no particular reason for his reserve.

An hour later, Whitney and he started for Edinburgh, with Dick on the carrier of the motor bicycle. The machine was powerful and they meant to travel by short stages and stop at points of interest for a walk across the hills. When Dick got tired of the carrier he could take his turn in the side-car, and Andrew was glad to have him with them, particularly since he was dubious about the visits the lad was in the habit of making to Dumfries and Lockerbie. Dick generally returned late at night and did not look his best next morning.

Whitney enjoyed the journey. He had understood that southern Scotland was the home of scientific agriculture, and in this respect the valleys came up to his expectations, but when they left them on foot, as they did, now and then, they crossed barren, wind-swept spaces clothed with bent-grass and heather. In places, lonely hills rolled from horizon to horizon without sign of life except for the black-faced sheep and the grouse that skimmed the heath. He looked down into Liddesdale from Nine-stane Rig, crossed Ettrick Forest, and saw the Dens o' Yarrow, and St. Mary's Loch, while the names of their resting places rang familiarly in his ears. They awakened a responsive thrill, for he had read of them in Scott and some were the themes of ballads known wherever the English tongue is spoken. Although he was a good American, he felt that he was rather coming home than visiting Scotland for the first time ; the history of this rugged country was part of his inheritance. Then Andrew knew it well and with a little encouragement told tales of English invasions and fierce reprisals, of stern Covenanting martyrs and their followers' fanatical cruelties. Looking down from the heights of the Lammermuirs, he saw where Cromwell crushed his Scottish pursuers ; he climbed the battlements of old

square towers that had defied English raids, and traced the line of Prince Charlie's march.

Whitney found it rather bewildering. There was so much romantic incident packed into two or three centuries, but he felt he understood the insular Briton better than he had done, and this understanding improved his conception of the native-born American. It was here that some of the leading principles of American democracy were first proclaimed and fought for. Another thing was plain—if the spirit of this virile people had not greatly changed, deeds worthy of new ballads would be done in France and Flanders.

On the return journey they reached Hawick one evening and stopped an hour or two. Dick suggested that they should stay the night, but there was nothing to keep them in the smoky, wool-spinning town, and Andrew preferred to push on to Moss Paul by Teviot-head.

"The night air's bracing among the moors and I like to hear the whaups crying round the house," he said to Whitney. "It's a small hotel, built right on the fellside, and we should get there in an hour."

When they were strolling up the waterside, on the outskirts of the town, without Dick, who had stayed behind, Whitney looked at his watch.

"We'll get back; I've something to do to the machine, and I guess we had better pull out soon."

"Dick?" said Andrew, sharply. "Perhaps I shouldn't have left him."

"Well," said Whitney, "I don't know that it was wise."

Andrew turned round and they walked back to the hotel. Entering it, he found his cousin leaning against a table in a back room, while he talked in a soft confidential tone to a pretty waitress who had brought in a tray. Andrew knew this trick, for Dick had a manner that was hard to resist, and unceremoniously seized his arm.

"Come along!" he said. "We're ready to start."

Dick turned round. His eyes were brighter than usual and his face was somewhat flushed, but he grinned.

"You'll notice how cool I am and can take it as a certificate of my character," he said to the girl. "I expect you have men in this town who'd jump if they suddenly felt somebody grab them."

"It's likely," she answered. "But will your friend no' sit down a minute?"

"I think not," said Andrew. "We're late as it is."

"Ye telt me ye were staying here," the girl said to Dick, and Andrew, who thought she wanted him to stay, saw that Dick had made some progress. Then she resumed with a mocking smile: "Will he no' let ye?"

"I'm afraid I can't," Andrew replied with good humour.

She gave him a quick glance, as if to measure his influence. He had spoken with a courtesy she did not always receive, but she saw he could be firm.

"Weel," she said, "I suppose ye must take the road."

"Then I must have a last drink. Bring some more glasses, Netta," said Dick.

"No," said Andrew, smiling, as he turned to the girl. "You can give him the soda."

Dick drank it with a resigned expression. "There's one comfort, my dear; I can come back and I certainly won't be long. Now I'm afraid I'll have to go. You see, he's a determined fellow and one of my guardians."

"Have ye mair o' them, then?"

"I have three or four and I'll own that it takes them all to look after me. However, I must get off, and since my guardian has no tact, I'll have to be satisfied with shaking hands."

They went out and Andrew remarked: "You don't grow up, Dick."

"That's true; growing up's a mistake. Keep young while you can, my son. A little fooling does no harm and the girl's a decent sort."

"I imagine so, because she didn't try to keep you and took my hint about the drink. Anyhow, if she'd tried another plan, it wouldn't have worked."

"Think not?" Dick asked with a twinkle.

"I'm sure of it," Andrew rejoined. "I imagine I'm strong enough to carry you."

"Well," said Dick, "you don't preach much, and that's something." He went down the steps rather unsteadily and beckoned Whitney. "You can get on the back; I'm going to drive."

"I reckon not. You're going in the car. Put him in, Andrew, and shut the lid."

They set off, Andrew sitting on the carrier, and the powerful machine rolled smoothly out of the town. The street lamps were beginning to twinkle as they left it and low mist crept across the fields they sped past. The cry of geese, feeding among the stubble, came out of the haze, which lay breast-high between the hedgerows, clogging the dust, but it thinned and rolled behind them as the road began to rise. Then the stubble fields became less frequent, fewer dark squares of turnips checkered the sweep of grass, and the murmur of Teviot, running among the willows, crept out of the gathering dusk.

Cothouses marked by glimmering lights went by, they sped through a dim, white village, and Whitney opened out his engine as they went rocking past a line of stunted trees. They were the last and highest, for after them the rough ling and bent-grass rolled across the haunts of the sheep and grouse. Whitney changed his gear as the grade got steeper, the hedges gave place to stone walls until they ran out on an open moor, round which the hills lifted their black summits against the fading sky. The three men made a heavy load on the long incline, but the machine brought them up, and the last of the light had gone when they stopped in front of a lonely hotel. It looked like a Swiss chalet on the breast of the fell, and a dark glen fell steeply away from it, but it glowed with electric light.

"They seem to have some shooting people here," Dick remarked. "I'll run across and see if they can take us in, while you look at the carburettor. We may have to go on to Langholm and she wasn't firing very well."

He went up the drive and Whitney opened his tool bag. The top of the pass was about half a mile behind them, and the road, which ran straight down from it, widened in front of the hotel. There was a patch of loose stones on the other side, and the bicycle stood a yard or two from the gate. Everything was very still except for the sound of running water, and it was rather dark, because the hills rose steeply above the glen.

"Dick's some time in coming back," Andrew said, by and by.

"Perhaps you'd better go for him," Whitney suggested.

Andrew went off, but met Dick in the drive. "It's all right; there's nobody stopping here," he said. "I expect they keep the lights blazing to draw motoring people."

He spoke clearly, but with an effort to do so that made Andrew frown, but they went back together, and Whitney said: "I've fixed the sparking plug, but there's a nut I can't get hold of."

"Then go in and borrow a smaller spanner," Dick told him. "They have their own turbine and dynamo and keep a lot of tools."

Whitney left them and Dick made Andrew hold the lamp while he knelt in the road.

"Lend me your knife," he said. "His spanner will do the trick if I put something in the jaws."

"On the whole, I'm inclined to think you had better leave it alone," Andrew replied, meaningly.

Dick laughed. "You're a suspicious beggar, and might recollect that I wasn't away five minutes. Anyhow, there's a fascination in tampering with other people's machines. Where's the knife?"

Andrew let him have it, and soon afterwards Dick tore the skin from one of his knuckles.

"The beastly thing will slip, but I'm not going to be beaten by a common American nut," he said. "If I can't screw it up, I'll twist the bolt-head off."

"That won't help things much. Leave it alone."

"It's going," Dick panted, and then threw the spanner down. "A perfectly rotten contraption! There's another knuckle skinned."

As he stopped to wipe his hand, a loud humming came across the summit. Then four lights leaped up and their united beam rushed down the pass.

"That fellow's driving very fast, but he has plenty of room," Dick remarked, and Andrew, stepping back, saw that the tail-lamp of the bicycle was burning well.

Then as Dick got up, he moved out a yard or two across the road with the headlamp, half dazzled by the blaze of light that filled the glen. Suddenly the stream of radiance wavered, and Andrew wondered whether the driver had lost his nerve on seeing the patch of stones, which perhaps, looked larger than they were. Then he heard the wheels skid and loose metal fly as the car lurched across the road.

"Jump!" he shouted, violently hurling Dick back before he sprang out of the way.

He struck the bicycle with his lame leg, staggered, and fell on the gravel close to the gate. For a moment or two he had not the courage to look up, and then, with keen relief, saw Dick standing safe.

"The clumsy brute!" the lad cried in a voice that sounded hoarse with rage, and running to the bicycle, started it and jumped into the saddle.

The red tail-light streamed away through the dark like a rocket, and when it grew dim, Andrew, standing shakily, saw Whitney beside him.

"Looks as if he'd gone mad," the latter remarked. "He's driving her all out, down that hill."

Andrew did not speak and above the dying roar the

big car made in the narrow hollow they heard a shrill buzzing that sounded strangely venomous.

"Forty miles an hour, any way," Whitney resumed. "It would take a good car to get away from her. Is he fool enough to run into the back of it?"

"I don't know," said Andrew. "Dick's capable of anything when he's worked up. The curious thing is that his head is steadier than usual then."

They waited until the sound, which had been growing fainter, died away, when Andrew said: "I'm going down the glen."

After they had gone some distance, they heard a motor panting up hill to meet them. In another minute or two, a bicycle and side-car ran past and Dick waved his hand.

"Don't want to stop; she mightn't start again," he shouted.

"That's ominous," Whitney observed, as they turned back. "She never made any trouble about starting before he went off with her."

When they reached the hotel gate, Dick was waiting, and Andrew, taking up the lamp, which he had left in the road, turned the light on him. There was blood on the lad's face, which had a strained look, and the front wheel of the bicycle did not seem quite round.

"Did you overtake the car?" he asked.

"No," said Dick, with a forced grin, "I took the bank and I'm afraid the machine is something the worse for it. She brought me back, but I could hear the front tyre scrubbing against the fork." Then he turned to Whitney: "I'm sorry, but on the whole she stood it pretty well."

"You have brought her back in one piece, which was rather more than I expected," Whitney answered in a resigned tone. "But why did you go for the bank?"

"It was like this—I was gaining and close to the car when we got down to the bottom of the glen. You know it's very narrow there."

Whitney nodded. There was a sharp bend where road and stream ran out side by side through the sharply contracted gap in the hills. The slope on both sides was very steep and there was only a strip of grass between the road and the water, seven or eight feet below.

"Yes ; it's not the place I'd care to negotiate at full speed."

"I meant to catch the car and ran on to the grass to get a wider sweep, but she wouldn't take the curve. Went straight up the hillside for a dozen yards and then threw me off. Luckily I fell into some fern and when I'd pulled myself together, I somehow got her down."

"But the car ?"

"Got off," Dick replied in a strained tone. "I don't know if you noticed that it was grey."

"We'll talk about it again. You had better come and let us see if your face is badly cut."

They entered the hotel, but Dick stopped as they were passing the bar. "I expect you got a shock, and if you feel you'd like a drink, don't mind me ; you needn't be afraid of setting me a bad example, I don't want anything."

Andrew smiled. "Nor do I. Sometimes you're a very thoughtful fellow."

Dick said nothing and went away to wash his injured face.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON MERSEHEAD SANDS.

DICK'S cuts were not deep and he joined his companions at supper. One of the windows was open and the smell of peat smoke came in, while they could hear Ewes water running down the glen and the bleating of sheep. The room, however, was illuminated by electric light and a row of sepia drawings hung on the wall. By and by, Whitney indicated them.

"Local scenes, I guess ; they strike the right note," he said. "Give you the feel of the country, and there's something distinctive about the Border. What's that one—Branksome Tower ? I seem to have read something about it."

"I expect you have," said Andrew. "This is Scott's own country."

"Well, you're a patriotic crowd and one must allow that your ancestors' deeds are worth remembering, but there's a thing that strikes me. One goes into old English cities—Chester, for example—and finds streets that look as they did in Queen Elizabeth's reign ; but the Scottish towns you've shown me might have been built forty years ago."

Andrew smiled. "The reason lies in our national character. We're utilitarian and don't allow sentiment to interfere with progress. As soon as a building gets out of date, we pull it down. Our past lives in the race's memory and we don't need to keep it embodied in stone." Then he turned to Dick, who had been unusually quiet. "It's lucky you didn't get worse hurt, but did you see the car's number ?"

"I did not. The plate was covered with mud or dust."

"There has been no rain and the dust wasn't thick," Whitney objected. "I was near the gate when the driver swerved and couldn't see why he did so."

"He mayn't have noticed the loose stones until he was close up to them, and then lost control of the steering because he was startled, or perhaps the wheels skidded on the loose metal," Andrew suggested. "Our tail-light was burning and I had the head-lamp, though I don't remember if I held it up."

"You didn't, but the light splashed about the road," said Dick.

"It's curious, because if the fellow's nerve had given way, he'd have gone over the bicycle and into the gate," Whitney remarked, with a thoughtful air. "Anyhow,

he didn't lose control, because he straightened her up the moment Andrew threw you back."

"His nerve didn't give way."

Andrew looked hard at him. "You know something. What is it, Dick?"

"I believe I know the car," Dick said, grimly. "It isn't nice to think your own friends came near killing you."

Whitney sat very quiet, and Andrew said slowly: "You're sure?"

"Nearly so. I thought I recognized the hum she makes on the top gear, and when I was close behind them at the bottom of the glen, I saw the tail-lamp had a cracked glass and a ding in the top. It may be a coincidence, but our lamp's like that. I remember when Watson dropped it."

"Staffer certainly wouldn't lose control of his steering."

"No," said Dick; "he's as steady as a rock. So's Watson. You don't often find a lowland Scot of his type jumpy. I don't know which was driving, but I expect he didn't want to cut the tyres and thought he wouldn't run over us; but it was too close a shave. That's what made me savage; I felt that nobody ought to make me run such a risk."

Whitney lighted a cigarette and leaned back, watching the others, but Andrew resumed: "Staffer was going to Glasgow."

"Yes; the hydraulic ram that pumps our water had broken down and he meant to see the makers. Told me he might stop a few days."

"But would he come back by Edinburgh? Had he any business there?"

"None that I know of; we deal with Glasgow. I wanted him to come up to Edinburgh not long ago, but he wouldn't. Said he didn't know anybody in the place and there was nothing to do."

"After all, you may have been mistaken about the car."

"It's possible," said Dick. "We'll talk about something else. I don't like to think that Staffer nearly finished me and he wouldn't feel happy about it. On the whole, I imagine we shouldn't tell him."

"That might be better," Whitney agreed, and asking for the landlord, they arranged to send the damaged wheel to Hawick and planned a walk across the hills.

On their return to Appleyard, Whitney watched Staffer when Dick explained that they had been delayed by an accident in the glen at Teviot-head. He only showed a polite interest in the matter and when Whitney talked about Edinburgh, remarked that he found the city disappointing and seldom visited it.

A few days later, they sat on the terrace, one calm evening when Watson came back with the car and gave Dick and Staffer some letters.

"From Murray," Dick remarked when he had opened his. "They're going to search the Colvend country, next Thursday, and he suggests that we might like to join, though he hints that he's not allowed to give us much information."

"What does he expect to find?" Staffer asked.

"He doesn't say. Somebody working a wireless installation, I imagine."

"And is Thursday particularly suitable for that kind of thing?"

"It's Dumfries early-closing day. They can get a lot of motor-cyclists then. Murray states that the coast and moss-roads will be watched."

"You ought to go. Mr. Whitney would enjoy a day upon the heather," Elsie interposed.

"An opportunity of combining a pleasant excursion with a patriotic duty!" Staffer remarked. "Well, the high ground from Bengairn to Susie Hill will need some searching. No doubt, they'll push across the moors towards Black Beast?"

"Murray doesn't say, but it's probable, since he's starting from Auchencairn. I don't know if the

military authorities have got the spy mania, but if there is any ground for suspicion, it can do no harm to draw the Galloway moors. What do you think, Andrew ? ”

“ I’d try the hills farther east.”

“ About Eskdale, of course ! ” Staffer said with ironical humour, but Whitney imagined that he meant to give Andrew a lead.

“ Well,” said the latter, “ I don’t claim much strategical knowledge, but if we take it for granted that a hostile force could be landed on our east coast——”

“ Rosyth’s being a naval station would make that difficult. But go on.”

Beginning rather awkwardly, Andrew worked out a supposititious plan of campaign, and Whitney, who had just been over the ground, thought he proved his point. The scheme he outlined certainly looked practical, and Whitney imagined that Staffer was more interested than he pretended, and that his objections were designed to draw Andrew on. Both showed a knowledge of military needs and history, and when Staffer mentioned Cromwell’s retreat on Dunbar, Whitney thought Andrew’s defence of his favourite route across, instead of round, the Lammermuirs was good. He noted that Staffer did not claim as much local knowledge ; indeed, he thought he was careful not to do so.

“ I’m not convinced that we have much to fear, but you have worked the thing out very well,” he said at length. “ Have you thought that the War Office might find something to interest them in your views ? ”

“ I expect they’re bothered enough by amateur strategists,” Andrew replied. “ Of course, I may be all wrong, but if there really did seem any need for it, I’d try to get somebody with influence to put my ideas before them.”

Staffer, who had opened a letter in the meanwhile, looked at his watch. “ I must send off a telegram ; Watson will just have time to take it in.”

He left them, and Mrs. Woodhouse, who looked

disturbed, remarked: "All this is very distressing. It is a horrible war. One hates to think of it."

"Yes," said Elsie, sympathetically; "it is hardest for you. I sometimes forget that I am not altogether British by birth, though I am in sentiment."

"Ah," said Mrs. Woodhouse, "to be drawn in two different ways, that is difficult. I was young when I left home, and your father was the best of men. I made his country mine, and I have been happy here, but after all, one cannot quite forget. I try to hope for Britain's success—but something calls me, now and then. The poor old Emperor—he has had much sorrow—the boys I used to know, killed by the pig-breeding assassins; Vieu' made to obey Potsdam." Then she forced a smile. "But I must not talk in this way; you are young, and it is good that you look forward instead of back."

Whitney felt that he had been inclined to misjudge the reserved woman. Her feeling was natural, and the indifference she generally showed was not, as he had at first suspected, a mask. She was really simple, but her heart was right.

"Well," he said, to break the awkward silence, "old associations tell. I'm a modern American, but there's something inside me that responds to what I see here. But are we going on this spy hunt?"

"I could take the boat to Rough Firth," Andrew suggested. "Then we might go on to Wigtown Bay, where you could see your people. Will you come, Dick?"

"Yes, as far as Rough Firth, but I don't know about the rest. Small boat sailing needs an acquired taste. You have to get used to eating half-cooked food and sleeping among wet sails. On my last cruise, drops from a deck-beam fell on my face all night when it rained. Andrew's hardier, and, no doubt, truer to the old strain than I am, but while the Annandale Johnstones did many reckless things, they had generally sense enough to stick to dry land."

They made the necessary arrangements, and a few days later the *Rowan* went down the Solway with the strong ebb-tide. The shoals were beginning to show above the sand-filled water when she drifted past a point fringed by low reefs and boulders, at Criffell's southern foot. Whitney guessed its distance as about three miles, and took a compass bearing at Andrew's order. The coast turned sharply west at the point, and the mountain, sloping to meet it, broke down into a wall of cliffs that rose, grim and forbidding, from the beach. At one place, a gap in the wall suggested a river mouth. There was not much wind, the sky was hazy, and on the port hand a stretch of grey water ran back to the horizon. It looked like open sea, but the strong rippling in the foreground indicated that the tide was running across thinly-covered banks.

"I'd have liked a breeze," Andrew remarked. "If we bring her round, the ebb will sweep us past the mouth of the Firth. There's not much water on the sands ahead, but we ought to get a fathom, if I can find the Barnhourie gut. Keep her as she's going, Dick, with the knoll ashore on the bowsprit-end, while I look at the chart."

He went below and Whitney, taking up the boat-hook asked Dick: "Do you know this gut?"

"I remember something about it, but they keep changing. See what depth there is."

Whitney found six feet, and looked round as he heard the topsail flap. The *Rowan* was sailing upright, but going very fast, with the current eddying about her. Wreaths of sand came up to the surface and went down again.

"Keep her full," he said. "She's luffing off her course."

"It's possible. The tide's strong and she's not steering well. I expect there's enough water everywhere, but Andrew must find the gut; feels he has to do the proper thing. He's made like that."

"We'll take no chances," Whitney answered, and shouted through the scuttle: "Pull up the board and come on deck."

He felt relieved when Andrew's head appeared. After a glance round, the latter swung himself up, and jumping aft took the helm from Dick.

"Ready with the head-sheets! We'll come round," he shouted.

She began to turn and then suddenly stopped, with a rush of sandy water boiling about her stern. Andrew seized an oar, but could not push her off, and she sank on one side until the water flowed along the lower deck-planks.

"I guess she's fast," Whitney said. "Where are we?"

"On the Barnhourie tongue of the Mersehead bank," said Andrew, throwing down the oar. "I meant to run through the gut between them." He turned to Dick. "You're a hundred yards off your course."

"That's the tide's fault. But shall we take the sail off her?"

Andrew thought for a minute. "Yes. I don't know about laying out an anchor. The flood runs pretty fast here; but we'll see when the sands are dry."

They lowered the canvas and then went below to cook a meal. This took them some time, because the floor and lockers slanted awkwardly, as the boat listed over, and when they went on deck again, the light had begun to fade. Though he had been partly prepared for it, Whitney was astonished at the transformation. What had looked like open water when he went below, was now a waste of sloppy sand that ran back as far as he could see. It was, however, pierced by a broad channel, from which a depression, filled with shallow pools, cut through the bank and ended in a lagoon not far off. This was evidently the gut Andrew had meant to navigate. The cliffs round the bay, to the westwards, were losing their sharpness of outline,

but two or three blocks of houses and a tower on the rocky point, showed black above the level strip behind them.

“That’s Southernness ; they’ll light up, soon,” said Andrew. “I know one of the light-keepers and I’ll walk across and ask him about the entrance to Rough Firth. There’s a flock of duck up the channel, Jim, and you might get a shot at them from the dinghy when it’s a bit darker. Will you stay on board, Dick ? ”

“I will not. There’s nothing more melancholy than sitting alone in a stranded boat. I’ll go with Jim and he can land me on the bank if I’m in the way.”

Andrew went below and trimmed the anchor-light, and after fastening it to the forestay, set off across the sands. Half an hour later, Dick and Whitney carried the small, folding dinghy to the channel and pushed her off. The current was now slack and they made progress until Dick shipped his oars and kneeling down, took up the small hand paddles, but he let her drift for a few moments while they looked about. It was dark and the shore-line had faded, but some distance up the channel a small black sail was visible across the bank, and a steady bright beam marked the Southernness lighthouse. Half-seen birds were wading about the water’s edge, but Dick said these were oyster-catchers and not worth powder and shot. A curlew’s wild whistle fell from overhead and the cry of a black-backed gull came out of the obscurity like a hoarse laugh. It was rather dreary ; their clothes and the dinghy were getting damp, and dipping the paddles, Dick drove the boat ahead.

By and by, they distinguished a cluster of small dark objects some distance in front, and made towards them cautiously. The ducks did not seem to get much plainer and Whitney thought they were swimming away. Stopping a few minutes to allay suspicion, Dick paddled again, but the duck vanished as they crept on. Then he turned in towards the back and

pushed the craft along the bottom, hoping the dark background would hide their approach. After a time, they saw the ducks and Whitney raised his gun.

There was a red flash, smoke blew in his face, and the air was filled with the clamour of startled wildfowl. Still, he had heard a splash and Dick getting out the oars, rowed ahead. As he picked up a floating mallard, they heard a flutter and knew there was a crippled duck not far off. Rowing out into the stream, they saw it rise awkwardly from the water, and Whitney fired and missed. After this, they spent some time in trying to get into range before he brought down the bird. Then they ran the dinghy ashore and Dick landed with his gun.

"I'll walk up the bank and try the soft places about the pools," he said. "If I don't turn up soon, it will be because I've gone back to the *Rowan*."

Whitney lighted his pipe while he waited to allow the birds to recover from their alarm, but he had to strike several matches because his hands were wet and was rather annoyed to find he had not many left. It was very dark, and as a cold wind was blowing, he lay down on the floorings for shelter and to hide the glow of his pipe. The birds were quiet, but a dull, throbbing roar came out of the distance, and he supposed it was the splash of the surf on the seaward edge of the shoals. When his pipe was empty, he got up, intending to step overboard and drag the dinghy down to the receding water, but did not find this needful, which indicated that the ebb had nearly run out. Paddling up channel, he heard the whistle of curlew, and for a time followed the invisible birds. He could not get a shot, and, deciding that he had had enough, laid down the paddles. Hitherto, he had been looking ahead, but when he put the oars in the crutches he was facing aft, and got a shock. The *Rowan's* light had gone. This disturbed him and he sat still while he wondered what he ought to do.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE DARK.

WHITNEY frowned as he looked about. He could see nothing except the black line of the bank a few yards away and the beam from the light-house on Southernness, though this had grown less distinct. There was no fog, but the air was filled with an obscuring moisture that wet his face and gathered upon the dinghy. Since the *Rowan's* canvas had been lowered she would be hard to see, and she lay at some distance from the water. He could not remember how long it was since he had seen the light, but it must have been some time, and he blamed himself for not ascertaining if it was burning.

Still, he ought to find the gutter near which she lay, and he knew the bearing of the Southernness light from there. He had guessed its distance, and if he took a new bearing now, the angle between it and the other would give him the length of the line he must follow to reach the neighbourhood of the yacht. Taking out a small compass, he struck a match, which went out. His hands were wet and the box was damp. He tried two or three more with no better success and when he got the last to burn, the knife-blade he laid across the compass cast a shadow on the card. This prevented his seeing the points and finding he had no matches left, he paused to think.

If his friends had returned to the boat, they would certainly not have put out the lamp, and it was disturbing to imagine their wandering about the sands, particularly as Andrew might have to cross some hollows up which the tide would shortly flow. Whitney shouted, but got no answer, and after waiting a few minutes began to row, because it was plain that he must relight the lamp as soon as possible. He kept out in the channel to get the help of the stream, which he thought was running with him, but did not seem to

be making much progress when he passed a projecting tongue of sand. Stopping to get his breath, he saw that the dinghy began to drift slowly back, and this disturbed him. The tide had turned sooner than he expected.

Heading in towards the bank, he rowed savagely, but the flat-bottomed craft did not pull well. Her main advantage was that she could be folded up and stowed on deck. By and by, bits of seaweed and flakes of scum drifted up to meet him, and he could hear the water ripple along the edge of the sand where the channel bent. The flood was beginning to run and he had not covered much distance yet. Sweat dripped from his face, his back ached, and his hands blistered, but this did not matter. Dick should be able to follow the channel down, but Andrew was, no doubt, a long way from land, with his retreat to the beach perhaps cut off. Moreover, Whitney saw that his own position was not fortunate.

He had the dinghy, but her side was only a foot above the water and the tide would presently sweep her up the Firth. He could not row against it long, and the current would capsize or swamp the boat if he struck a shoal. Still, it would be slack for about an hour and he must make good use of the time. His arms got stiff, but he kept up the pace and edged inshore until he touched bottom when he made a deep stroke. The temptation to turn round and look ahead was strong, but he resisted it. He must not relax his efforts for a moment and ought to see the mouth of the gutter when he had gone far enough. Unfortunately, however, the edge of the bank began to be indented by shallow bays, and, as he must pull straight across in order not to lose time, their ends were not always visible. It was unthinkable that he should overshoot the gutter, but he imagined it was still some distance off.

At length, he saw a bold ridge of sand that looked like the place where they had launched the dinghy,

but on pulling close in, could not distinguish the mark she must have made as they dragged her down. He rowed on for a hundred yards and stopped. There was no gutter, though he believed he had come far enough. The sound of the surf was ominously loud and a black-backed gull that fluttered overhead seemed to mock him with its hoarse, croaking laugh.

Whitney felt unnerved, but pulled himself together. His friends' lives, and perhaps his own, depended on his keeping cool. He must have passed the gutter, but he might see the *Rowan* from the top of the bank, and running aground he pulled the dinghy out. There was no grapnel, but she had a few fathoms of painter and he tied it to an oar, which he drove into the sand. This ought to hold her if she floated before he came back.

For a few minutes he walked rapidly away from the water, then turned and ran along the flat, but could not see the yacht and when he durst stay no longer came down to the channel. There was nothing that looked like the mouth of the gutter and the dinghy was afloat. Pushing off, he rowed a short distance and made another unsuccessful search. Whitney was now getting desperate, but tried to think calmly what he should do. He could fold up the dinghy and carry her towards the Southerness light, shouting as he went, but the others would be in very grave danger if he missed them; besides they would not both come the same way. The plan would not serve, he must try again to find the *Rowan*. Progress was difficult against the current, but he did his best and landing presently, dragged the dinghy up. She would not float for some time because the bank was steep, but he durst not go far, lest he should lose his way in coming back.

Striking shorewards, he ploughed breathlessly through soft sand, but saw nothing for some minutes. Then, when he was despairing, a black object emerged from the gloom. It might only be a hummock, but after

he had gone a few yards, he knew it was the yacht and felt a thrill of relief that was unnerving in its keenness. Still, he must brace himself and decide between two courses. The dinghy might be needed to take his comrades off, and there was a risk of her going adrift before he got back ; he ought not to lose a moment in returning. On the other hand, Dick and Andrew must be in danger of being cut off by the advancing tide and the lamp would show them where the boat lay, but it might take some time to light. Hesitation would be fatal ; he must do one thing or the other at once.

Running to the yacht, he got on board and unfastened the lamp from the stay, and then groped about the cabin for matches. At length, he found some and shaking the lamp heard the oil splash inside. The wick did not ignite readily and he had to rub the charred edge off, but by and by, the flame began to spread and he clambered on deck, striking his head against the hatch. When he reached the bow, he found himself shaking and scarcely able to tie the lamp to the stay, but he jumped down on the sand and ran towards the channel. He could not see the dinghy and feared that she had gone, but by and by found her, afloat and straining at the rope.

Jumping on board, he pulled along the edge of the bank until an eddy swept him into the mouth of the gutter, and this decided a point he was anxious about. The tide was flowing into the hollow from the channel and not from its seaward end, which meant that there was less danger of the others being surrounded. The rising water carried him close up to the yacht, and when he got on board he sat down, breathing hard and conscious of keen nervous strain. He shouted, but there was no answer ; only the crying of wildfowl and the ripple of the tide broke the silence. It was running fast up the gutter, surging noisily over the uneven bottom and lapping the edge of the sand, and Whitney soon heard a splash against the garboard plank.

He must now grapple with a fresh problem, because the *Rowan*, drawing little water when her centreboard was up, would shortly be afloat. Andrew had not laid out an anchor, since this might be dangerous. If the anchor failed to hold, she would sheer across the current before her keel was quite off the bottom, and the leverage of the taut chain might help the rush of water to press her down into the sand or roll her over. One could take no chances with the Solway tide. Still, if left unmoored, she would drive across the flats, away from his comrades. Whitney could not tell what to do, and while he waited in tormenting indecision, the boat rose upright and the water swirled furiously round her bilge. Then his heart leaped as a cry came out of the dark, and soon afterwards two indistinct figures appeared at the side of the gut.

"Be quick! She'll be off in a moment and the anchor's on board," he shouted, pulling up the dinghy to row across.

"Then stay where you are; we can wade it," Andrew called. "In with you, Dick."

They were soon knee-deep and Whitney saw the current boil about their legs when they stopped as the water got deeper, but Andrew encouraged Dick, and they went on again and reached the yacht. Dick was panting, but Andrew seemed quite cool.

"I don't know about the anchor yet; we'll wait," he said, and stood watching the tide ripple past.

"You didn't stop very long and it was lucky I met Andrew when I lost the channel," Dick remarked to Whitney, in a resentful tone.

"Hold on, Dick," said Andrew. "Perhaps you'd better go below and change your clothes."

Dick left them, and when the boat was beginning to move uneasily, Andrew said: "The stream's getting slack; I expect the water's coming through from the other end." In another minute or two, she slowly floated away and he threw the anchor off the bow.

"She'll ride to it, but as we needn't make sail until the flats are covered, we'll go down and get supper."

He changed his clothes while Whitney lighted the stove, and then asked: "How did the lamp go out?"

Whitney related his adventures and Dick turned to him with a smile. "Sorry I was huffed, but I dare say you can make allowance for my feelings. They'd got rather harrowed while I wandered about in the dark, but you did the right thing in going back."

Dick made some coffee and when it was on the table Whitney was glad to lean back on a locker and light his pipe. With two candle lamps burning, the narrow cabin looked very snug and cheerful after the desolate sands, and it was something to see Andrew sitting opposite, safe but thoughtful.

"Did you trim the lamp properly?" Dick asked him, by and by.

"I did," said Andrew, with a touch of dryness. "It's a thing I don't often neglect. Mixed the oil myself—colza and a dash of paraffin—and the lamp's the best I could get in Glasgow. Suppose you bring it down."

Dick did so, and Andrew took off the oil-container, which was nearly full, and examined the burner. There was nothing wrong and Whitney noted the good workmanship of the fittings.

"One would allow it couldn't go out," he remarked.

"That," said Andrew, frowning, "is my opinion, but as I came down to the gutter, I saw only two rows of footsteps, and you made those in coming and going back to the dinghy. I can't say there wasn't another track, because the light was faint so far from the boat, but we might have looked about the deck and cabin-top to see if anybody had been on board."

"I expect I mussed it all up with sand," Whitney pointed out.

"But who'd want to come on board?" Dick asked. "Theft could be the only object, and we'll soon find out about that."

They looked round the cabin, but missed nothing, and Dick resumed: "A thief wouldn't have put out the light, because he'd know that might bring us back before he got away." Then he turned to Whitney. "What do you think?"

"Well," said Whitney, smiling "I've only one suggestion and it's rather far-fetched. The thing might have been a dark plot to make us lose the boat or, perhaps, make an end of us. If that's so, it nearly succeeded."

"Rot!" exclaimed Andrew. "Nobody would be twopence the richer for putting me out of the way."

"And I haven't an enemy in the world, unless it's myself," Dick said, with a grin. "I don't count the Kaiser, because the bad feeling's patriotic; I've nothing personal against him."

Andrew made a sign of impatience, and Whitney, watching him closely, thought he felt disturbed.

"Did you see anybody on the bank?"

"I didn't," Whitney answered. "I saw a small sail; a lugsail, I think, because it was long on the head. It looked very black."

"Tanned with blacklead and oil; one of the Annan whammel boats. They drag a net for salmon, but wouldn't get any just now as the water's too smooth."

"Then why were they out?"

"After flounders, I expect. Anyhow, none of the Annan men would meddle with our light."

"Well," said Whitney, "what kept you so late?"

"The tide. The water used to run up the gullies from the channel first, but when I was coming back, I found a broad stream flowing in from the other side and had to go a long way round to get across. That lost me my bearings, and I couldn't see the *Rowan's* light. I'd some trouble in finding the channel and struck it lower down than I expected, soon after I met Dick, who was badly lost, and I'll own to feeling anxious until the light sprang up. However, we'd better make a start if we mean to reach Rough Firth this tide."

“Now and then I’m glad I’m not much of a seaman,” Dick remarked. “As I’d probably pull the wrong string, I’ll stop below and smoke.”

A cold east wind was blowing when Whitney went on deck, and after hoisting sail they crept away against the tide. Whitney sounded with the pole until he could no longer touch bottom, when Andrew seemed satisfied. It was very dark, but two quivering beams pierced the gloom, and after a time, Andrew said: “Get the topsail down. We’ll find the stream that fills Rough Firth in a few minutes and it will take us up fast enough.”

This proved correct, for shortly afterwards the sea broke about them in confused eddies, and the boat splashed and lurched as she crossed the troubled space that divided the tides. Then she forged ahead very fast and, by and by, blurred hills and shadowy cliffs loomed out. Whitney used the sounding pole again, the cliffs grew plainer, and when the land closed in on them, they dropped anchor. She brought up and, after helping to stow the canvas, Whitney got into his folding cot.

For a time he did not sleep but lay thinking about the extinguished light. It seemed impossible that the lamp should have gone out accidentally, and he was not satisfied that the explanation he had humorously offered was altogether absurd. His friends had had another narrow escape not long ago, and it might be significant that although they were together on both occasions, Andrew had run the greater risk. Whitney admitted that this might be coincidence and he must not let his imagination run away with him. One must use sense and not wrap up a matter that might be perfectly simple in romantic mystery. For all that, he meant to seize any clue that chance might offer him.

Next morning they landed and joined Murray at a village among the hills. They spent the day upon the heather, working inland across broad, grassy spaces and red moors where the sheep fled before them, and

then climbed a line of rugged hills. These were not high, but Whitney found them romantically wild as he scrambled among black peat-hags where the wild cotton grew, up marshy ravines, and past great granite boulders. Stopping now and then to get his breath, he watched the line of small figures stretched out across the waste and thought that nobody lurking among the stones and heather could escape. Still, when the different detachments met upon a windy summit, none of them had seen anything suspicious.

"We've drawn blank," Murray remarked, as they ate some sandwiches behind a boulder.

"Yes," said Andrew. "If there is anything to be found out, I'd locate it farther east."

Whitney thought Murray looked rather hard at his comrade, but he said: "On the whole, I agree with you. It's, however, my business to search where I am told."

They went downhill soon afterwards, and next day the *Rowan* sailed west along the coast, with Dick, who reluctantly consented to go with the others, on board.

CHAPTER X.

ANDREW'S ALLY.

IT was a fine afternoon when the train ran down from the granite wilds round Cairnsmuir into a broad green valley. Behind, the red heath, strewn with boulders and scarred by watercourses, rolled upwards into gathering cloud; in front yellow stubble fields and smooth meadows lay shining in the light, with a river flashing through their midst. Whitney, watching the scene from a window, thought the change was typical of southern Scotland, which he had found a land of contrasts.

He had left the *Rowan* at Gatehouse of Fleet, where a river mouth opened into a sheltered, hill-girt bay, and walked up a dale that was steeped in quiet pastoral

beauty. It, however, led them to a wind-swept table-land, in which lonely ruffled lochs lay among the stones and granite outcrops ribbed the desolate heath. There they had caught the train, and now it was running down to well-tilled levels dotted with trim white houses and marked in the distance by the blue smoke of a town. Andrew had chosen the route to show him the country, and Whitney admitted that it had its charm. But the train was slowing and Dick got up when it stopped.

"I may be able to buy a paper here ; they'll have a bundle in the van," he said.

He jumped down on a platform where shepherds with rough collies, cattle-dealers, and quarrymen were waiting, and vanished among the crowd, but came back before the train started, without a newspaper.

"I nearly ran into old Mackellar," he explained. "Don't know whether he's coming with us or had just got out ; but he didn't see me."

"Who's Mackellar ? " Whitney asked.

"Agent for the Caledonian Weavers, which is one of our big banks. What's more to the purpose, he's one of my trustees." Then Dick turned to Andrew with a grin. "I thought I'd better not meet him ; he might have felt embarrassed after what he said to me not long ago."

"I don't think that's likely," Andrew rejoined. "My opinion is that his remarks were justified."

The train went on, and alighting at the next station, they walked downhill to the narrow town beside the Cree. Here they arranged to be driven up the water-side to the shooting lodge where Whitney's mother was staying, and after standing on the bridge a while went back to the Galloway Arms. It was now getting late in the afternoon, the hillside above the town shut out the light, and the room they walked into was rather dim. Dick stopped just inside the door.

"Mackellar, I'm off ! " he exclaimed, as a man got up.

"Come away in ; I'm alone," said the other. "Is

that Dick behind his cousin? Ye're not going before ye speak to me?"

"I want to show my friend Minnigaff," Dick replied, and Whitney glanced at the stranger, who seemed ironically amused.

Mackellar was about fifty years of age, strongly built, and dressed in quiet taste. He had a shrewd, thoughtful face with a hint of command in it, and there was a touch of formality in his manner, but Whitney liked his faint, twinkling smile.

"Weel," he said, "I'd like to meet your friend, and Minnigaff's worth seeing."

Dick presented Whitney, who imagined that Mackellar studied him, after which he said: "It's an interesting country, and Andrew's the right man to see it with, but I would be glad to show ye Nithsdale, if he'll bring ye to Dumfries."

"I don't regret that I haven't much taste for antiquities," said Dick. "However, as Andrew's well up in that kind of thing, we want him now. There are some old tombstones with a history, at Minnigaff."

"With Mr. Whitney's leave, I'll keep your cousin here until ye come back," Mackellar replied, and Whitney felt amused as he saw that Dick had failed in his rather obvious intention of preventing the others enjoying a private talk.

When Whitney and Dick had gone, Mackellar rang a bell and said to Andrew: "Ye'll join me with a glass o' wine." The wine was brought, and though Andrew did not hear what Mackellar said to the waitress, he imagined they would not be disturbed.

"I would say Dick's new friend is to be trusted," Mackellar remarked.

"Of course," said Andrew. "If I grasp what you mean, he'll do the lad no harm, but he's really a friend of mine."

"That should put the thing beyond all doubt," Mackellar replied, and filled the glasses.

Andrew, who understood that he had been paid a compliment, waited. Mackellar was generally deliberate, but people valued his opinion. He had been a lawyer, but in the small Scottish towns lawyers are entrusted with their clients' investments, and, in consequence, are often appointed agents by the banks.

"I think ye see your duty to your cousin," Mackellar resumed.

"Yes," said Andrew, simply. "I wish I saw how it ought to be carried out. I'm at a loss there."

Mackellar's nod indicated sympathetic understanding. "Ye're young and want to see the whole road ahead. It's enough that ye walk cannily, doing what seems needful as ye find it. For a' that, I'm glad to hear ye feel that ye are responsible. It's some help to me."

"Then you take a personal interest in him?" Andrew hesitated, and added: "I mean, if you understand, apart from your being a trustee."

Mackellar smiled. "I understand. We're dour folk and not given to sentiment, but I think we can be trusted to pay our debts, and Dick's father was a good friend o' mine. It was the Appleyard business first put me on my feet, and afterwards, Johnstone's good word went some way with the Caledonian Board. Then your cousin is a likeable lad, though he's given me trouble, but we'll not dwell on that. There are other things to talk about."

"Have you paid off the debts he owned to?"

"Some. There are one or two for which the holders would not give up his notes."

"Why?"

"They carry high interest and fall due at a future date. Then I have reasons for thinking the holders are agents for a principal in the background."

"The fellows must take a risk, because Dick's not of age. Hasn't the law something to say about a minor's debts?"

"It has, but I'm not sure the risk is as big as it looks.

Would ye expect a Johnstone o' Appleyard to repudiate his obligations ? ”

“ No,” said Andrew. “ When you come to think of it, such a thing's impossible.”

“ Weel, there's another point ; your cousin did not tell us all he owed.”

Andrew frowned. “ I must own to a fear that Dick wasn't quite straight.” He was silent for a few moments and then resumed : “ What's to be done ? Can we take him away from Staffer ? ”

“ Why would ye wish that ? ” Mackellar looked hard at him.

“ It's not easy to explain and my position's difficult,” Andrew answered awkwardly. “ Dick thinks highly of the fellow, and I can't see anything that's openly wrong with him. Still, one feels he hasn't a good influence on the lad.”

“ Just that,” Mackellar dryly remarked. “ Ye cannot interfere because ye have a feeling ; it will not make a useful plea. Dick's mother put the lad into his hands and I had no power to stop her. If Mr. Staffer abused his position, it would give me a handle, but I cannot find fault with anything he does. A careful, well-thought-of man, and exact to a penny in the estate accounts.”

“ And yet you don't trust him. If you did, you'd tell him about those debts instead of me.”

“ Weel,” said Mackellar, “ there maybe something in that.”

Andrew knitted his brows. “ I feel there's something going on, so to speak, behind the scenes, but I can't tell what it is. Do you know that Dick's heart is weak and dissipation and excitement are bad for him ? ”

“ I heard something about it.” Mackellar gave Andrew a steady, meaning look. “ Your cousin will not be in danger until he's twenty-one.”

“ What danger could threaten him ? ” Andrew asked, uneasily.

“ I cannot tell—ye have heard that loose living is bad for him. He’ll be free from restraint when he comes of age.”

Andrew had a dark suspicion that this was not all Mackellar meant. “ Suppose his creditors insisted on his insuring his life ? ”

“ There’s a difficulty—insurance companies are not as a rule anxious to take a man with a weak heart. For a’ that——” Mackellar broke off and sipped his wine in silence before he resumed : “ I’ll try to follow up the matter of the notes and ye’ll keep an eye on Dick. If ye remark anything suspicious, ye will let me know. Now, I think there’s no more to be said.”

Andrew agreed, and lighted his pipe. He was troubled by vague suspicions that Mackellar seemed to share. On the surface, they looked somewhat ridiculous, but he was not satisfied, and Mackellar had admitted the need for vigilance. Well, he must keep the best watch he could. By and by, Whitney came in and looked round the room.

“ Dick’s not back ? ” he said. “ I reckoned I’d find him here.”

“ Ye might try the bar,” Mackellar replied, with a twinkle. “ Mr. Johnstone’s not anxious to talk to me. How did ye lose him ? ”

“ I rather think he lost me. Said he saw a man he knew and went after him, but didn’t come back,” Whitney answered, regretting that he had lent the lad some money shortly before he left him. “ Anyhow, he knows we’ve ordered tea and it’s ready. Will you sit down with us ? ”

Mackellar did so, and when the trap they had hired was waiting, Dick came in. His face was flushed and his eyes gleamed with amusement as he glanced at Mackellar.

“ I shan’t have to leave without a word or two, after all.”

“ Well,” said Mackellar, “ ye cut it very fine. But where have ye been ? ”

“ In the other hotel. I found a number of people there. They'd been to the Creetown sheep sales and were in a convivial mood. In fact, they wouldn't let me go.”

“ It's no doubt a matter o' taste, but one would not expect to find a Johnstone o' Appleyard colloging with drovers in a bar-room,” Mackellar observed.

“ I don't know that it makes much difference, but I was playing cards.”

“ Losing money ye could not afford ! ”

“ No,” said Dick, chuckling. “ I won five pounds. To begin with, I didn't do badly at nap and that made them keen to get their money back ; but they made a mistake in choosing a game that gives more scope for brains. It's quite a mistaken notion that the wastrel always gets fleeced.”

“ What did you do with your winnings ? ” Andrew asked.

“ I understand it's a sound business principle to keep your money turning over, and I put the lot on a horse. You see, I got a straight tip from a man in the bar.”

“ A straight tip ! ” Andrew exclaimed. “ When will you learn sense ? ”

“ I rather think I have some now,” said Dick. “ You can ask those cattle-dealers ; they're not the men to lose their money easily. However, we had better get off.” He shook hands with Mackellar, to whom he said, “ I'm, no doubt, a bit of a nuisance, and you mean well by me, but it's possible you have got hold of a wrong idea. I don't know that I'm a very plump pigeon, but I'm not to be plucked so easily as some people think.”

“ I wish I knew what ye meant by that ? ”

Dick's face changed and hardened, and Mackellar thought he looked more like his father than he had ever seen him do.

“ It doesn't matter, and it may be clearer later on. Of course, Andrew's much more of a Johnstone than

I am, and, for one or two reasons, I'm glad he is, but there's a bit of the old strain in me. Now you have something to puzzle over and I hardly think you'll get the answer right."

They drove away in a high-wheeled trap that is locally called a machine, and as they left the town, Dick remarked: "Old Mackellar's a good sort. It's curious how being a bit of a wastrel gets you good friends, but hardly fair, when you come to think of it, because nobody seems interested in the virtuous plodders. Take yourself, for example. You have been going to trouble on my account that I certainly don't deserve, and Jim lent me three pounds; rash, of course, but a touching mark of confidence."

"I'm sorry now," said Whitney. "I didn't know you'd put it on a horse."

Andrew had set off in a serious mood, but it was difficult to continue thoughtful in Dick's society, and he enlivened the way as they followed the winding river. It led them up a long valley, past turnip-fields, smooth pasture, and alder-fringed pools. The soil was well tilled on their bank, but across the stream, birchwoods turning yellow straggled up the barren hill slopes, and to the north, rugged fells rose dark against the sky. By degrees the landscape changed. There was less cultivation and the woods got thinner. Rough heath ran down to the river, which foamed and brawled among the stones, and white tufts of wild cotton shone among the peat. They were climbing to a desolation of moor and bog that looked strangely wild and lonely in the fading light. Then, as the shadows closed upon the wilderness, lights blinked among the firs in a glen, a lodge gate was opened, and a smooth drive led them to a straggling modern house.

They were hospitably welcomed, and Andrew liked his host, a genial, grey-haired man who had lately retired from business to spend his well-earned leisure in outdoor sports, at which he owned he was by no

means proficient. Whitney's mother and sister also impressed him favourably. Mrs. Whitney was quiet and dignified, and there was a touch of stateliness in Madge's refined beauty. At first, Andrew felt shy of her and left her to Dick, but she soon set him at his ease. Madge rang true, and he found that she could be remarkably frank.

On the evening after his arrival he strolled along the terrace talking to her. A soft red glow still shone behind the firs that straggled up the western end of the glen and the air was cool and still. They could hear a little burn splashing in the shadow and the river tumbling among the stones.

"How do you like this place?" he asked. "From what I've seen of your country, I expect it's a change."

"Yes," said Madge, "it's quiet. When we rusticate in the wilds we take a troop of friends along. The environment we're used to goes with us, and that's perhaps why I don't harmonize with a natural background as some of your people do. Here, for instance, I feel I'm an exotic."

"Exotics are generally beautiful and one likes them for their glow and colour. Ours is a land of neutral tints and I daresay it has an effect upon our character."

Madge laughed. "That's very nice of you, but it's difficult to judge your character. You're not an expansive race, and, for another thing, there are no young men about, though one must admit that's to their credit, just now. It seems there's still an answer when you send round the Fiery Cross."

"Yes," said Andrew, with a flush. "They were wanted somewhere else, and they went. But the Fiery Cross was a Highland institution; we didn't use it here."

"That's delightfully matter-of-fact; I expect it's Scotch." She paused, and gave him a sympathetic glance. "Jim told me why you couldn't go. After all, you have something to do at home, haven't you?"

Andrew saw that she was well informed about his

affairs, but did not resent this. When he took his comrade into his confidence he did not do so rashly, and that Whitney had told his sister only proved that she could be trusted. Something in her manner and her frank, level glance made him sure of this.

"Well," he said, hesitatingly, "it's nice to feel one's needed, though, of course, there's a risk of being officious."

"I don't suppose Elsie thinks you officious for trying to look after your cousin. He's quite charming, but I imagine he'll keep you busy."

"Yes," said Andrew, with a twinkle, "I'm prepared for that, but I don't mind the trouble. Dick's very likeable and Elsie feels more satisfied when I'm about. I wish you could meet her. Little Elsie's worth knowing."

"Little? Jim told me she was tall; regal, I think he said. In fact, he's enthusiastic about her, and that makes me curious, because Jim's taste is not often bad."

"It isn't. But I always thought of her as little Elsie—she was a girl when I left home. I can understand what struck your brother; I felt it myself when I first saw her, after I came back."

"Elsie had grown up?"

"It wasn't quite that. She had grown up in the way I had expected, but she had somehow grown beyond it. In fact, though I used to be a kind of elder brother, she had caught me up and left me."

He broke off, but Madge's manner was sympathetic. She drew his confidence.

"I'm not bored," she said. "Elsie must have needed you when she brought you back from Canada."

"She didn't altogether do that; there were other things," Andrew objected, with some embarrassment.

"Well, I'm interested and want to get her fixed. Why does Jim call her regal? You know he's not a fool."

"It isn't quite the right term, and yet it suggests the meaning he was searching for," Andrew answered

thoughtfully. "Elsie's not haughty, but you feel she has a pride that's as clean and bright as flame. Of course, it isn't obvious; she tries to keep it out of sight, but you know what she is when she looks at you. Dick is really no relation, but since chance seemed to make it her duty, she has taken care of him like a sister. Our people are, perhaps, rather hard to understand, but loyalty's a characteristic of the best Scotswomen. However, I must be boring you."

"No," said Madge, "you have interested me; but here are Lieutenant Rankine and Mr. Watt."

A brown-faced young man, who had arrived on the previous afternoon, came up with their host and presently said to Andrew: "As I hear you're cruising about the Galloway coast, I wonder whether you are the Mr. Johnstone who once made a trip round Scotland alone, in a very small boat and afterwards published the log in *The Field*?"

"I am," said Andrew, with some awkwardness. "But I didn't publish the log. The club secretary did so without telling me."

"Then he must have done yachtsmen a service. I read the cruise at Malta and was struck by the clearness of the navigation notes. It was a very interesting record of a rather remarkable trip."

"I don't know," said Andrew. "MacMullen and the other fellows did a good deal more. Then I really hadn't any trouble except, perhaps, one day in the Pentland Firth. You see, she was a very able little boat."

"An able boat requires handling. However, if you are cruising between the Isle of Man and the Solway, I daresay we shall meet, and we'll be glad to see you on board the *Tern*."

"The *Tern*?" said Andrew in surprise. "She's——"

"An antiquated barge?" Rankine suggested. "Well, she makes a handy surveying craft, and the

sea lords have lent me to the hydrographic department. Rather a come down just now, but somebody must keep the charts up to date."

Andrew felt puzzled. Rankine had a capable look, and, being young, was no doubt ambitious. It was curious that he should be satisfied with the monotonous task of taking soundings, when the battleships were watching for the enemy's fleet. They, however, began to talk of shoals and tides, and Madge Whitney joined her brother.

"You have had a long talk with my partner," he remarked. "Are you still pleased with him?"

"Entirely so; he improves, which doesn't often happen. In fact, he's fine, if you get what I mean."

"Well, I imagine Andrew's unique, but that doesn't quite hit it. Suppose we say rare, in its old English sense. Anyhow, though I don't know that he's very susceptible, I'd sooner you didn't turn his head. You are attractive when you exert yourself."

Madge laughed. "He's proof against my charms. Andrew's ear-marked for somebody else."

"Elsie Woodhouse? Well, that struck me, but I don't know. He says it's very possible that she'll marry Dick."

"No," said Madge, firmly. "He's in love with her himself, though I don't think he knows it yet. Then, while Dick's delightful, the girl would never be satisfied with him."

"So I think; but you haven't seen her."

"Your partner has drawn her portrait. I feel it's lifelike."

"Andrew has his talents, but the delineation of character's not his strong point," Whitney answered, with a gleam of amusement. "I find his descriptions of people foggy."

"A precise description isn't always needed," Madge rejoined. "When you have an image clearly stamped upon your mind, it's sometimes possible to make others see it without saying very much. Your partner can do that."

"Perhaps you're right. He has now a notion that his country's somehow threatened from the old main road to the south. On the face of it the idea's absurd, and yet he makes one feel that he's not quite mistaken."

Maud indicated Rankine, who was still talking to Andrew. "I wonder why they sent that man to a post where ability doesn't seem to be required?"

"It's possible the British Admiralty don't know how to choose their officers, but I rather imagine that Rankine's job is more important than he's allowed to own."

He broke off, for Rankine came towards them, and soon afterwards, the party went into the house.

CHAPTER XI.

DICK GOES SHOOTING.

AFTER spending a week at the shooting lodge, Andrew and his companions went to sea again, and one stormy afternoon ran round a point into a shallow bay. The tide was about half ebb and muddy flats rose out of the water. Low hills shut in the foreground and wet woods rolled steeply upwards from a marish strip behind the stony beach. Andrew dropped anchor in a quiet pool, and as they lowered sail the rain stopped.

"Now I'm here I'll go and see Gilmour," he said. "I'll walk up and get somebody to drive me back if it's a bad night. This is a good place for duck, and if you take the dinghy about low water, you ought to get a shot, but you had better keep off the beach. The laird's jealous of his rights."

"Mr. Barrington-Smythe is not a laird," said Dick. "He used to be a company floater, and when he came here thought the privilege of bullying everybody in the neighbourhood went with the estate. It doesn't in Scotland, and he may be wiser now, but I heard he'd

had trouble with that wildfowling friend of yours not long ago.

"There's nothing to be gained by provoking him," Andrew replied, and went down to change his clothes.

Dick rowed him ashore and afterwards sat smoking with Whitney in the cabin. It was a cold, damp day, and the narrow, white-painted room looked very comfortable with the open-fronted coke stove burning.

"We won't have much chance until it's nearly dark, and we'll get some tea before we start," Dick remarked. "Gilmour's a W.S., which means a lawyer, and a talkative old fellow, and as it's a long way to the town Andrew won't be back until nine or ten o'clock. Barrington-Smythe, on whose estate we're going to shoot, is a type I have no use for. When he bought the land a few years ago he imagined he bought the wildfowl on the beach and the fish in the sea, which was a very grave mistake, as you'd understand if you knew the lowland Scot. Among other people who tried to show him he was wrong, there was a professional duck-shooter that Andrew knows. Andrew, of course, is not conventional in the choice of his friends. Well, Robertson used to come here with a boat and shooting punt, and the Smythe man tried several very unfair ways of stopping him, but I imagine hasn't managed to do so yet."

"It's pretty hard to get a grip of your British ideas. You're a landowner, and one wouldn't expect you to like poachers."

"The Scottish character's complex," Dick said, grinning. "We're what old folks call 'thrawn,' which means roughly that we very seldom do what we're told we ought. Then, of course, there are different kinds of landowners, and Barrington-Smythe is about the limit. After all, taking care of an estate properly isn't so easy as some people think."

He stirred the fire and after the meal was over put out the lamps and pulled up the dinghy.

"We won't need a light to find her, and on the whole it might be better not to show one," he said, meaningly. "Now, if we drift down channel with the ebb, we'll have to pull up again, and I'd sooner wait behind that bit of broken wall."

They left the dinghy at the water's edge, because Dick explained that she might be handy there, and took their post among some withered fern behind the ruined wall. A muddy creek wound inland close by, and the boggy field it traversed ran back to the woods. It was not very dark and the sky was clearing, but low mist hung about the swampy land and the ridge of woods cut off the wind. The tide murmured among the sands and the whistle of wildfowl rose from the wet flats.

By and by a fanning of wings grew louder, and Whitney, glancing over the wall, saw a wedge of dark objects against the sky. They were swooping down very fast and he raised his gun. He saw red sparks leap from the muzzle and pulled the second trigger as the wedge broke up. There was a thud in the grass, and a few moments later a dusky object clumsily fluttered down.

"One each!" said Dick, clambering over the wall. "Mine's a cripple and we've got to find it."

They had trouble in recovering the wounded duck, which went some distance before it dropped; and then, as the field they crossed was very wet, came back along the edge of the wood. It was necessary to pick their way and after a time they stopped in front of a deep drain. The mist stretched in belts across the marish ground, but here and there a pool glimmered among the grass. On one side, leafless trees rolled in a vague black mass up the hill, and except for the murmur of the tide everything was very quiet. Whitney, however, was not quite satisfied, for he thought he had heard a stealthy rustle in the wood a minute or two ago.

"Seems to me we'd better make for the beach," he said.

"I sank up to the knees in coming, and I haven't

sea-boots on, as you have," Dick replied and sprang across the drain.

Whitney followed with difficulty, because sea-boots are not adapted for jumping in, and while he floundered up the bank a very small, dark object rose from the ditch.

"Snipe!" cried Dick, and a double report rang out.

Whitney did not hear the bird fall, for a snipe is hard to hit, but next moment there was a whistle in the wood and somebody across the field shouted:

"Watch ye the fence, Jock; I'll turn them back!"

"Run!" said Dick, setting off at full speed, but Whitney dropped quietly among a clump of rushes.

It was plain that they had fallen into a trap, and he regretted that he had not had time to warn Dick. He could hear the lad splashing across the bog, and by and by a crash as he broke through a hedge, but the noise would show the keepers where he went, and one was between him and the beach. They took up the chase, and presently Whitney heard a triumphant shout and a short scuffle. Since this must mean that Dick was caught, he picked up the ducks, which the lad had dropped, and retired as quietly as possible across the bog. The birds might be useful as evidence, and one of the keepers would, no doubt, come back to look for him. He reached the beach unnoticed, and launching the dinghy waited for a time, but could hear nothing except the calling of the wildfowl, which had returned to the flats.

Dick had obviously been taken away, and the keepers were either satisfied with one prisoner or afraid to give him a chance of escaping if they separated. As he wore a battered sou'wester and an old boating suit of Andrew's, Whitney imagined he would be mistaken for a poaching fisherman if he did not talk. There was nothing to be done, and rowing to the yacht he took off and hid his muddy clothes and the ducks. Then he lighted his pipe and opened a book. After all, Dick would probably be released when he reached the laird's house.

The cabin was warm and Whitney, who had been at sea all day, soon felt drowsy. He supposed he must have gone to sleep, for the book lay upside down upon the locker when he started at a shout. Putting his head out through the scuttle, he saw a dark figure on the beach, and next moment a stone splashed into the water near the yacht. Then he pulled the dinghy alongside and rowed ashore, and in two or three minutes Dick entered the cabin. The lad's oilskin cap was pulled down on his forehead, and there was a muddy smear across his face. His clothes were wet and his jacket had a long tear in it.

"Did they let you go?" Whitney asked.

"They did not. But I must say you don't seem to have disturbed yourself on my account. I expected you to draw one of the fellows off."

"You had a start," said Whitney. "Besides, I reckoned you'd be able to explain matters if you couldn't get away. But how did they catch you?"

Dick grinned as he indicated the tear in his jacket. "They didn't catch me. A barbed wire in a fence held me until they came up. It's lucky Andrew's not fastidious about his clothes."

"It might be wise to take them off and dress as differently as you can," Whitney suggested. "Then you can tell me about the thing."

When he had changed his clothes Dick lighted a cigarette.

"Now the adventure's over, I see it had its humorous side," he began. "While I was struggling at the fence, like a sheep among the brambles, the keepers came up together, and there was nothing to do but give in. The one who seemed to be the head made some very personal remarks, from which it looked as if he had seen the boat and mistaken me for the pot-hunter, Robertson. I thought I wouldn't put him right in the meantime. They didn't stand on ceremony, but marched me off across the fields, and when by and

by, we turned into a drive, I knew we were going to the hall. Then I began seriously to think, because I'd a particular objection to meeting Barrington-Smythe."

"Why?" Whitney asked.

"Well," said Dick with a twinkle, "I met him once at a political garden party. He's a man who must be right in front, and the way he gets there sometimes gives offence. They had to give him the leading speech, and in a giddy moment I saw how he could be led to make himself ridiculous. I'll spare you particulars, but the plot worked."

"You thought he'd remember it?" Whitney suggested.

"I did, and saw that the scrape might prove serious if he turned nasty. To make things worse, the whole front of the house was lighted, which seemed to show that he had guests and they'd soon be coming down to dinner. Well, the keepers marched me up, to the front door, and when I stood in the hall with the sou' wester pulled well down, one of them said to a footman, 'Ye will tell Mr. Barrington-Smythe that we have got the fella.'

"It was obvious that a plot had been made to catch us, but you can imagine the situation. The hall was brilliantly lighted, and I stood in the middle of the floor, with two big fellows ready to knock me down if I made a move, while I could hear a rustle of dresses that showed the women were beginning to come downstairs. Luckily, I'd only a few moments to wait before Barrington-Smythe appeared.

" 'You should have come sooner; can't have dinner interfered with,' he said. 'I'll see him afterwards. Put him in the gun-room and send Kevan for the police.'

"The gun-room was on the top floor, and as the keepers pushed me upstairs two of the women had to stop to let us pass. I kept my head down and looked as like a criminal as I could. Then the keeper had to take the key from the inside lock, and while he was doing so I heard the guests talking about me.

“ ‘I’ve never seen a real poacher,’ a girl said to Barrington-Smythe. ‘Won’t you bring him down after dinner and let us look at him?’ ”

“ ‘Perhaps it wouldn’t be safe. Aren’t they often violent?’ another remarked, and somebody else said, ‘But this one seems very young and tame. Do you think he would reform if you gave him another chance?’ ”

“ ‘You have some imagination, Dick, but I miss the realistic touch,’ Whitney observed.

“ ‘Well,’ said Dick, “I certainly must have looked remarkably tame and foolish, but I didn’t hear any more, because the keeper said, ‘In ye go!’ and pushed me into the room, after which he locked the door and they went away. They hadn’t lighted the lamps, and after falling over things I found a chair by the window and sat down to think. Barrington-Smythe wasn’t the man to enjoy the joke if he recognised me. It was possible he’d send me to the Fiscal, and if he didn’t, he’d certainly write Staffer a sarcastic note and see that the affair was known. I wouldn’t have minded that myself, but one must make allowance for one’s relations’ feelings. There was a chance that I might pass for Robertson, whom they thought they’d caught, if only I could keep my cap on, but, after all, that wouldn’t help much, because they meant to hand him to the police.

“ ‘After a time it struck me that I needn’t wait until the police arrived. The door was locked, but the window could be opened, and when I looked out there was a greenhouse with a light in it not far below. Lowering myself carefully, I was able to stand upon a rafter, and then slide down it. The beam was narrow and wet, and when I slipped one foot went through the glass. I stopped a moment, but nobody seemed to have heard me, and I put the other foot through two or three more panes. This cheered me up, and I thought I’d better show them how I’d gone. In fact, I worked my leg through as far as I dare, to see if could upset a tall flower-stand, and was sorry I couldn’t.

"When I came to the gutter, it wasn't far to the ground, but the keeper had taken my gun and put it in a corner of the hall. As it was Staffer's best, I felt I must try to get it, and crept along the grass beside the terrace. The door wasn't quite shut, and when I quietly slipped in, the gun was where I'd seen it. Five minutes afterwards I was clear of the grounds."

"You were pretty smart, but I don't know what Andrew will say about it," Whitney remarked.

"He'll growl, as a matter of duty, but he's used to my escapades. I'll wait up for him if you want to sleep."

Whitney slept well. Indeed, it was seven o'clock next morning when he wakened and heard the dinghy bump alongside. Then Andrew's voice said, "Light the stove. I'm going ashore with the water-breaker; there's a spring in the wood."

On getting out of his berth Whitney found that Dick had gone on deck, but while he was cooking breakfast the lad called him up.

"This is awkward!" he said. "They've caught Andrew, and I'm afraid the cap proves his guilt."

Looking shorewards, Whitney frowned as he saw two men standing in front of Andrew on the edge of the wood. They seemed to be talking excitedly, but it was too far to hear what was said, and as the dinghy was on the beach Whitney could not leave the yacht. By and by Andrew went away with the men, and Whitney understood Dick's remarks about the oilskin cap. Sou'westers are, as a rule, yellow or black, but Andrew had repainted the one Dick had worn with red lead, and the keepers would remember the unusual colour.

"You didn't tell him about last night's adventure?" he said sharply.

"I didn't," Dick admitted. "Perhaps that's a pity, but I'm not sure. After all, it may be as well he knows nothing about the matter, because they think he's Robertson or one of his friends."

"What difference does that make?"

"It may have some effect," Dick replied with a chuckle. "I understand Barrington-Smythe has bothered the Fiscal about the fishermen and shore-gunners, though it's doubtful if he has any right to the beach. Now, things will probably go much like this—the keepers will declare, on the evidence of the cap, that they caught Andrew last night and show the pheasant he shot."

"But we didn't shoot a pheasant."

"That won't matter. The pheasant will be produced all the same. I know something about keepers."

"What is a Fiscal, anyway? A police boss?"

"A magistrate, but with different powers from an English one. In a country district, he's rather like a Western sheriff."

"Then hadn't we better go up and see him? What's he likely to do about it?"

"We won't take the flavour off the tale by anticipating; I want to hear Andrew tell it, and he doesn't need us," Dick replied. "For all that, I'd like to be there, because Andrew will be indignant, and he's not a fool. He'll see he holds the ace of trumps, but I expect he'll keep it until they've shown all their cards."

Three or four hours later a smart boat with two men rowing came alongside the yacht and Andrew, who wore the red sou'wester, an old blue jersey, and an oil-skin jacket, got on board.

"Barrington-Smythe's gig!" Dick remarked when Andrew had sent the men away. "This is something like a triumphant return."

"It is," said Andrew dryly. "I suppose you were poaching last night and left me to pay for it."

"As you had taken the dinghy, we couldn't interfere. Besides, I think Barrington-Smythe could have been made to pay."

"Something of that kind happened," Andrew admitted with a twinkle. "I suppose I had better tell you about it. Well, they took me up to the town in a

car and I'd time to think things over on the way. When we arrived, I told Barrington-Smythe it might be wise if he went with me to Gilmour's and asked the police superintendent to meet him there. The suggestion seemed to surprise him, but he agreed, and I got a word or two with Gilmour before the superintendent and the Fiscal turned up. I don't know why the latter came, but imagine that Gilmour, who knows him pretty well, had sent for him.

"Gilmour began in this way—the keepers had arrested me for poaching, and I was quite prepared to let the matter go into court, but he thought it would save trouble if Barrington-Smythe agreed to talk it over before making a formal charge. He would, however, like Superintendent Grant to hear what was said and perhaps the Fiscal would prefer to stop.

"Barrington-Smythe, who began to look uneasy, did not object, and the Fiscal said, 'You understand that I cannot deal officially with the case here, but as Mr. Grant has not yet recorded it, I see no reason why I should go away.'

"'Certainly not, sir,' said Grant, and the head keeper told his tale.

"He arrested me on the previous night after I'd fired four shots at roosting pheasants in the wood, and had nearly caught me on previous occasions. When asked if I'd killed any pheasants, he said they had not time to search, but when they'd done so the birds would be shown if required. Then he locked me into a room at the hall, from which I escaped after maliciously damaging a greenhouse." Andrew turned to his cousin. "Did you do much damage, Dick?"

"Well," said Dick, with a chuckle, "I really think I did as much as I could. If I'd had stronger boots, I might have made a better job. But go on."

"The Fiscal said he had no right to examine the keeper then, but would like to ask if he was certain I was the man he captured last night.

“ ‘I am that,’ said the fellow. ‘I’ll swear to his red cap.’

“ ‘As he had it on when he was brought to the hall, there can’t be much doubt,’ said Barrington-Smythe. ‘My men have seen him before and know him well.’

“ ‘What time was it when you caught him?’ Gilmour inquired.

“ ‘About half-past seven. It wanted a few minutes to eight when we reached the hall.’

“ Gilmour rang a bell and asked a clerk who came in : ‘Did you notice when I left the office with this gentleman last night?’

“ The clerk looked at my clothes with some surprise, but answered without hesitating, ‘Half-past six, sir ; I remember because it was later than usual, and I was waiting to lock up.’

“ ‘Very well,’ said Gilmour, signing him to go. ‘This gentleman came with me to my house and did not leave it until nine o’clock. I can call two persons well known to yourself who spent the evening there with him.’

“ ‘Then he is a friend of yours!’ Barrington-Smythe broke in.

“ ‘Certainly. Perhaps I’d better state that he was paying me a visit after returning from Canada, where he has been for a year or two, which does not fit in with your keepers knowing him well. I have nothing more to say.’

“ Barrington-Smythe got very red, and the superintendent’s eyes twinkled when he asked him if he wished to make a formal charge.

“ ‘No,’ he said, ‘I don’t, but I’ve still a suspicion that I’ve been tricked.’

“ ‘I think you are wise to let the matter drop,’ the Fiscal told him. ‘If it had been brought before me in my official capacity, I should have had some remarks to make, and your keeper might have got himself into serious trouble. I hope he will take this as a warning.’

“ Barrington-Smythe went away without apologising, but the Fiscal stopped to smoke a cigar. When he left, I asked Gilmour why he had led the other fellow on.

“ ‘ Weel,’ he said, ‘ I had an object. Two or three of the townsfolk, who are fond of duck-shooting, resent Barrington-Smythe’s trying to put them off the shore. Robertson will be here shortly, and I’m to defend him if the keepers bring him up. Ye can imagine what the Fiscal will think of their evidence and their master’s methods.’ ”

Andrew stopped to light his pipe, and then resumed : “ That’s all about it and it’s rather late to feel indignant about the trouble you got me into. There was one thing the keeper said that I noted, because I thought he told the truth. He declared I’d come there once or twice at night in a small lugsail boat. You see, it must have been a strange boat, or he’d have known it.”

“ Somebody else poaching,” Dick said with a chuckle. “ But you or Jim will have to swim ashore for the dinghy ; then perhaps we’d better get off, for fear the keeper sees me and finds out his mistake.”

CHAPTER XII.

BARENNAN CRAG.

A LIGHT breeze was blowing when the *Rowan* ran into a confused tide eddy in the mouth of Wigtown Bay. There had been more wind and the swell it left was broken by the current into short, splashing seas amidst which the yacht lurched uneasily. It was four o’clock in the afternoon and about two hours before high-water, and when the breeze fell very light a stream that ran north from the disturbed patch swept the *Rowan* up the bay. Andrew, who was bound for Ramsey, frowned as he looked about.

“ She’s right off her course, but it’s too deep to anchor, and the bottom’s foul near the beach,” he said. “ We

must let her drift until the ebb sets in and carries her down along the opposite shore. We ought to make Ramsey on the next flood."

"At four or five o'clock in the morning," Dick grumbled. "Well, I'm glad I'm no use at the helm in the dark, and we may get a few hours' smooth water before we round the Burrow Head. At present I'm wondering why I came."

"There's some water in the bilge and it's your turn to pump," Whitney remarked.

"If she was half full, I wouldn't pump until this rolling stops," Dick said firmly.

The sea got smoother as they drifted along the coast, and presently ran in faint undulations that gleamed like oil where their surface caught the light. The days, however, were getting short, and soon the long tongue of land across the bay cut low and black against the sunset. The hills to the eastwards were grey and dim, a heavy dew began to fall, and a pale half-moon came out. Now and then a puff of wind from the south rippled the glassy water and drove the yacht farther up the bay. By and by an inlet began to open out ahead and Dick took up the glasses.

"We ought to find water enough across the sands to Gatehouse," he said. "I'd a good deal sooner sleep ashore and we'd get a much better meal at the Murray Arms than Whitney can cook."

"We can't get there without a breeze," Andrew replied.

"There's somebody going up. I can see a lugsail boat beyond the point."

Andrew took the glasses from him. The light had nearly gone and mist hung about the shore, but a belt of water shone with a pale gleam, against which a distant boat stood out.

"She looks like one of the Annan whammeliers; they use a sail with a shorter head in the West, but I can't see what an Annan man would be doing here."

Putting down the glasses, he thoughtfully filled his pipe, and Whitney remarked: "The night our lamp went out on Mersehead sands I saw a lugsail boat. What kind of fellows are the whammeliers?"

"Unusually good seamen. The boats are very small, but they turn out in very wild weather when the salmon are about."

"That was not what I meant."

"Then they're a sturdy, honest lot, but you don't often find a set of men that doesn't include a wastrel."

Soon afterwards a white light and a green one twinkled some distance behind the yacht, and Dick said, "That steamer's moving slowly."

"A trawler, I expect. She's probably waiting until it's dark, when she'll put her lights out and drop her net. I understand the Fishery Board forbid trawling here."

The others said nothing further, and the *Rowan* drifted shorewards with an eddy of the tide, which had begun to turn. The moon was half obscured by haze, but they could see a wall of cliff to starboard with a narrow line of surf at its foot. Part of the wall seemed detached from the rest and Andrew said to Whitney: "That's Barennan Island. This strip of coast was a favourite haunt of Dirk Hatteraik's, but tradition locates his cove at Ravenshall across the inlet yonder. It might have been convenient for running contraband up the Cree and Fleet, but the shore abreast of us has better hiding places, besides being nearer open sea."

"Dirk's been dead a long time, and has no successors in the business," Dick interposed. "I expect his gang were more ruffianly than romantic, but they must have given the neighbourhood an interest with their signal fires, vessels running in at dark, and pack-horses winding through the moors." Then he exclaimed: "The trawler's gone!"

"She can't have gone," said Andrew. "She hasn't had time to steam farther than we could see her lights."

"Then's she's put them out. Perhaps the net's over."

"What's that light ashore?" Whitney asked.

A twinkling flash appeared on the high, black cliff behind the island and went out, but after a moment or two flickered up again and growing brighter, burned for a time.

"That's strange," said Whitney. "It looks as if the smugglers weren't quite extinct."

Andrew made no comment, but when a cool breeze came off the land edged the boat closer to the beach. It showed as a grey blur beneath the crag, hardly distinguishable except for the white fringe of surf.

"I'm curious about that light," he admitted. "I'd have said it was somebody baiting a long-line or looking for lobsters, only that the fellow wouldn't have waited for high-water. Then it was too brilliant for a lantern."

"We'll go ashore if you like; I was once on Barennan Crag," said Dick.

"Very well. Scull in instead of rowing; it's quieter. Then I'd take the small cask and ask if there's a spring about if you meet anybody."

Whitney launched the light dinghy and put an oar in the sculling notch when Dick joined him. The swell looked higher than it had done from the yacht, and as he heard it tumbling among the stones he wondered how they were to land. Besides, it was difficult to keep the lurching craft on a straight course, and he stopped sculling when a weedy ledge of rock with a white wash running over it appeared in the gloom.

"Go on," said Dick. "Keep the reef to starboard. There's a cove."

Swinging past the ledge as an undulation rolled in, they were met by its broken recoil, but Whitney drove the craft through this, and a few moments later ran her on a narrow beach. It felt smooth when he got out, and quietly lifting the boat beyond the reach of the

water, they made for the cliff. After a few yards they came to large, rough stones, and Dick stopped. Everything was quiet except for the splash of the surf, and the wall of rock rose above them, black and mysterious.

"We couldn't see anybody against that background and it's difficult to move quietly among these stones," he said. "I think we'll try the crag."

It took them longer to reach it than Whitney expected, but presently Dick stopped in front of a mass of fallen rock.

"Follow me close ; the path isn't good," he said.

They went up carefully, feeling for a foothold among the stones, until they came to a ledge that ran upwards across the face of the cliff. Whitney could see nothing below him, but he followed Dick, and by and by they reached a ravine filled with tangled grass and heath, which led them to the summit. Here they lay down behind a whinn bush and Whitney understood why his companion had chosen the position. The moon was hidden, but the sea reflected an elusive light that distinguished it from the blackness of the land. He thought anybody moving along the beach would show against the glimmer of the water, and though he could not see the *Rowan*, Andrew had, no doubt, steered a course that would bring the island behind her canvas. It was, of course, possible that their landing had been noticed, but the dinghy was very small and the dull roar of the surf would have drowned the noise they made.

Turning quietly, Whitney looked inland across high, rolling ground. It was all obscure, but there were grey patches, which he supposed were belts of mist, in the hollows and two or three dim lights twinkled in the distance. Now and then a bleating of sheep and the whistle of a curlew came down the cold wind. There was nothing to rouse suspicion, and he had begun to think of going back when Dick touched him.

A shadowy figure showed against the water, a short distance from where they had landed, and then a

flickering beam of light fell upon the sea. It was too bright for an ordinary lantern, and Whitney could not see where it came from, but after a moment or two it was abruptly cut off.

"There's another cove behind the point and I think I know a way down," Dick whispered. "Come on as quickly as you can."

The figure vanished, but as the light was obviously a signal, it was worth an effort to learn something about the men who had made it, and Whitney knew Dick would not be deterred by the risk. When he got on his feet the lad had already started and turned down the landward slope of the crag, where they stumbled among prickly whinns and long heather. In a few minutes, Dick was breathing hard, but he kept up the pace, and they presently came to a ravine that seamed the front of the cliff. It looked dangerously steep and there did not seem to be a path, but Dick went down, following a runlet of water, and now and again catching at the grass and stones to check his descent. Whitney, following as closely as he could, hoped Dick knew the way and the ravine did not end in a precipice.

By and by he fell into a hole among the stones, and Dick had drawn away from him when he got up, but he could now distinguish the lad's figure against the sea. No sound but the growl of the surf reached them from below, but this was loud enough to drown any footsteps on the beach and cover their rather noisy descent. Whitney reached the edge of a pool where the runlet of water widened, and was looking for a way across when he saw Dick stagger. He swayed in a curious way, as if trying to recover his balance, and then suddenly disappeared. Whitney thought he heard a fall, and splashing through the water came to the edge of a very steep slope. He could not see the bottom, but went down, clinging to the stones, and after sliding the last few yards found himself on the beach. Dick lay motionless on a slab of rock close by.

"Are you badly hurt? Shall I help you up?" he asked.

"No," said Dick faintly. "Leave me alone."

Whitney sat down beside him, feeling alarmed. The dinghy was some distance off, and he did not know whether one could reach it by the beach. It would be impossible to carry Dick across the rough stones without help, the *Rowan* was too far off for Andrew to hear a call, and he did not want to leave the lad, who might be seriously injured.

"Do you feel better?" he asked presently.

"Don't talk," said Dick. "Think I'm coming round."

Whitney waited anxiously and five minutes later the lad held out his hand. "Give me a lift; I'll try to get up."

He got on his feet with Whitney's help, but leaned on him heavily for a minute. Then he said, "I can move along slowly; there's a way across the point."

They were some time crossing the slippery rocks, but at length Whitney helped the lad down to the sand and felt keen satisfaction when they came to the dinghy.

"I'm much better," Dick said as Whitney pushed off. "Must have been half stunned; expect I knocked my head as I fell down the last bit."

"Then you'd feel where you hit it. Is it cut?"

"Don't fuss!" Dick answered feebly. "She'll wash back up the beach if you don't pull."

Whitney occupied himself with the oars, but felt puzzled. Dick seemed to have turned dizzy before he fell, and although it was possible that he had struck his head, his statement that he had done so looked like an afterthought. It was, however, his business to find the *Rowan*, and he could see by the way the cliff slid past that the tide was now running down. He had to pull hard to get near the island, and the wind was rising, but by and by he distinguished a patch of dark canvas, and a few minutes later ran the dinghy alongside the yacht.

"Lash the helm and come below," he said to Andrew after helping Dick on board.

Andrew stopped to throw a sail over the skylight when Whitney lighted the lamps, and then went down and looked at Dick, who lay on a locker. His face was very white, his lips had a blue tint, and the veins showed dark on the back of his colourless hands.

"I think you had better have a drink," he said, taking out a whisky bottle.

Dick drained the glass. "That's good ; I'll soon be all right. I slipped when we were coming down the crag and pitched over the edge of the steep bottom bit."

"He thinks he hit his head," Whitney added.

Andrew felt Dick's head in spite of his objections. "There is a lump, but not large. It doesn't account for the shock you seem to have got."

"Does it not ?" said Dick. "If you had fallen down that rock, I don't suppose you'd feel very fit. But give me a cigarette and ask Jim to tell you about the thing."

After he had given him the cigarette, Andrew put his head out of the scuttle. A breeze had got up, blowing off the land, and the yacht was drifting seaward with her loose mainsail flapping and her jib aback. She would need no attention, and closing the hatch he sat down and listened to Whitney's story.

"Do you think they heard Dick fall ?" he asked.

"I can't say. It's possible, though the swell was breaking noisily on the beach."

"It's a curious affair," said Andrew. "I saw the light and was glad I'd kept the boat in the gloom of the island. It certainly looks as if the steamer that put her lights out and the whammel boat that crept in to the land at dusk had some connection with each other. Then I thought I heard oars shortly before you came off."

"Suppose the boatmen had meant to signal the vessel, why did they land when they could have lighted a flare on board ?"

"It would have shone all round," said Andrew. "By coming ashore they got the crag for a screen and a high platform. The light could be seen farther off, but only from the sea."

"But what would they want to signal from a place like this, and whom would they signal to?"

"I don't pretend to know. It's a long distance from a main line, but a fast car would cover a good deal of ground in an hour or two." Andrew stopped, and, taking a chart from a rack, pointed to the narrow channel between Scotland and Ireland.

"You see how close Fair Head is to Kintyre," he resumed. "Well, all the shipping from the Clyde and a good deal from Liverpool passes through that gap. You can imagine what would happen if it was filled with mines."

"The difficulty is that the mine-sowers would be seen. The lighthouses on Rathlin and Kintyre command the channel."

"It's hard to see a vessel that carries no lights, and a mine-sower wouldn't proclaim his intentions. There's a big fleet of trawlers working in the Irish Sea, and a stranger would excite no remark by slipping in amongst them. It wouldn't take long to paint on a registered number and copy the funnel of a steam fishing company."

"No. Then I suspect Rankine has another duty besides taking soundings. A small survey vessel could cruise about among the shoals without attracting much notice. Her business would be obvious, but that needn't stop her crew from watching out."

"Well," said Andrew, "it isn't difficult to form a theory to fit the few things we know. However——"

"It would probably be all wrong when you'd made it," Dick broke in.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," Andrew replied with a smile. "I'll go up and look after the boat."

He left the scuttle open and the others heard blocks

rattle as he hauled the main sheet, and the soft splashing at the bows as the yacht gathered speed. After a time Whitney looked thoughtfully at Dick.

"I'm not sure it was the blow on your head that knocked you out. You reeled as if you were getting faint before you fell."

"Well," said Dick, "suppose I did? I may have been running harder than was good for me; but can't you understand that one shrinks from making a fuss about one's weaknesses?"

"Of course. This means you want to keep the real explanation from your cousin?"

"I'd very much sooner that nobody knew. Falling on your head is a good enough reason for feeling faint, and, as a matter of fact, I hit it hard enough."

"Very well," agreed Whitney. "I suppose I must say nothing, since you have taken me into your confidence."

"Then you might let my cot down and pull out the blankets. I'm not quite right yet and think I'll go to sleep."

Whitney arranged the cot for him, and then, going up on deck, sat in the cockpit while the *Rowan* stretched across the bay before a fresh easterly breeze.

CHAPTER XIII.

DICK'S RELAPSE.

HEAVY rain lashed the windows at Appleyard and a wild west wind buffeted the house. Between the gusts one could hear the wail of storm-tossed trees and the distant roar of the flood tide foaming across the Solway sands. It was, however, warm and bright within the thick granite walls, and Andrew lounged in a corner of the billiard-room after dinner, watching Elsie knit. She was making a soldier's

woollen belt, and he noted the precise neatness of the work. Elsie was conscientious in all she did, but he thought this view of the matter did not go far enough. The care with which she linked up the stitches was deepened by love.

"It will be a lucky man who gets the belt," he remarked. "We must hope he isn't by any chance one of our enemies."

Elsie looked up with a smile. "After all, I wouldn't mind that very much, so long as he needed it. It must be dreadful to lie out, cold and hungry, in the snow."

"It is," said Andrew. "I've done something of the kind. Yours is, no doubt, the right view, although it's hard to take. Charity ought to be catholic, but ordinary folks would sooner benefit their own side, particularly when the other seems to be singularly unchivalrous."

He stopped as he saw a tinge of colour creep into her face, but she quietly met his apologetic glance.

"I know you didn't mean to hurt. I do remember sometimes, that, in a sense, I belong to the other side."

"You can't help that, and you're Scottish to the backbone in all that matters."

Elsie's eyes twinkled. "You're not making it much better, but perhaps you'd lose something if you were not so frank. One distrusts people who always say the proper thing."

Andrew glanced at a well-dressed, handsome man who was playing billiards with Dick. He came to Appleyard for a day or two now and then, and had been there when Andrew arrived from Canada.

"Does that mean you don't quite trust Williamson? I've sometimes wondered whether it's his right name."

Elsie looked thoughtful and answered with some hesitation: "I don't think it is. He hasn't a trace of foreign accent and his ways are ours, but I've instincts I shouldn't have if mine was pure Scottish blood, and

I feel that he does not belong to us. Then I've noticed that he never talks to mother much."

"Of course," she resumed after a pause, "it's only changing his name, if he has done so, that matters, not where he was born. Our enemies are not all treacherous and cruel. You have seen the portraits mother has of her own people, and three or four were soldiers. They have kind, true faces, and when I was in Munich I saw others like them. I think they were men with an unusual sense of duty."

"You see what's best in everybody," Andrew replied. "I daresay it's the proper course, but it's often inconvenient. When you're sure your enemies are villains it simplifies things so."

Elsie laughed. "That sounds ironical. Are you trying to be smart?"

"No," said Andrew, smiling. "I have some sense. I really think it's what I felt. But if there are good fellows on the other side, why do they behave like savages?"

"Ah!" said Elsie, "the twilight of the old Norse gods hasn't quite vanished yet, but we and the others spring from one Teutonic stock. We still worship Thor with his hammer that stands for brute force. However, there isn't much use in moralising. Dick seems to be playing well."

Andrew glanced at his cousin, who was chalking his cue, and his eyes had an excited glitter. A syphon and a whisky bottle stood on a table close by, and Andrew wondered whether Elsie had remarked that Dick's glass was full again.

"I'll beat you if I can make that cannon," Dick said.

"Half a sovereign you don't, but you had better not take me," Williamson replied. "It would need a professional's stroke."

Andrew surmised that they were not playing for mere amusement, and noted that Whitney, who stood looking on, frowned.

"You sure can't do it, Dick," Whitney remarked, and his tone was restraining, while Andrew imagined that Williamson's was meant to be provocative.

Dick raised his glass and put it down again half empty before he poised his cue.

"Watch me, then," he said shortly.

He made the cannon, but something in his hot face suggested that it had been a nervous strain, and turning to the table he filled up his glass.

"Now," he resumed, "I think the game is mine."

His play was clever, but Andrew, watching closely, imagined that Williamson was not doing quite his best. It was difficult to say what gave him the impression, but he was a judge of matters that needed accurate judgment and steadiness of hand. Williamson was cool and skilful, but there was a cannon he ought to have made when he had an opportunity of making a break. It looked as if he did not want to win, which was curious, because Andrew did not think he felt any hesitation about taking Dick's money. When Dick won he reached out for his glass without turning round, and Whitney, who was behind him, struck the bottle with his elbow in stepping back. It rolled across the table, upsetting the glass, and fell upon the floor.

"Sorry," he said. "I didn't expect you to move like that."

Dick regarded him with an ironical grin. "You and Andrew are sometimes rather obvious, but you should try to be neat. You've done for the bottle, anyhow, and the consequence is I'll have to ring for another."

Andrew wondered how much Elsie understood, and was not deceived by her unchanged expression. Elsie was quick and did not always show her feelings.

"You made some brilliant strokes, but your play's a bit erratic," Williamson said to Dick. "It might be worth your while to study some of the good professionals. That reminds me, there's an interesting semi-private match next Thursday, and I've friends at the club."

He mentioned two players whom Andrew had heard about, and the door opened while he added something about the match. Andrew, who was watching his cousin, did not look up, and it was a few moments later when he saw that Staffer had come in.

"I've been suggesting that Dick should come to town to-morrow," Williamson said. "I can show him some good billiards."

"I can't stop him, although I imagine he'd better stay at home," Staffer answered with a smile. "As he has been warned to keep regular hours and that sort of thing, it's possible that the excursion mightn't be good for him. Dick's rather too keen a sportsman."

Andrew could find no obvious fault with Staffer's reply. On the surface, it was tactful, but something in his manner made it inciting instead of deterrent. He wondered what Elsie thought, but it was only because he knew her well he decided that she did not want Dick to go.

"You arranged to take us snipe-shooting on Wednesday," he said.

"So I did," Dick admitted. "Still, we could fix another day. We might get a woodcock if we waited a bit."

"I'm keen on snipe," Whitney interposed. "Besides, we're going down the coast again at the end of the week."

Staffer gave him a quick glance and Dick seemed to hesitate. "That makes a difference, though you could go without me. I'm not a crack shot."

"You know all about snipe, and where to find a cock," Andrew rejoined. "They ought to be here now and it's a long time since I bagged one."

"Oh, well!" said Dick, "you mustn't be disappointed, and we'll try to show Whitney the best sport we can."

Elsie looked at Andrew and he saw that she was grateful, but Staffer came across to where the others stood.

"I met Marshall, the salmon fisher, in Annan, and

he mentioned that they had run the Burnfoot boats up this afternoon," he said. "There was a big surf last high-water, and he asked if you had been down to the yacht. It looked as if he thought you ought to go."

Andrew signed to Whitney. "Is the bicycle all right, Jim?"

"Take the car," said Staffer. "Watson won't have housed her yet."

They started in three or four minutes, but it was not the *Rowan* Andrew thought about as the big car throbbed at full speed through the dark. He had kept Dick at Appleyard, and Williamson would be gone to-morrow, which was something to the good, because Dick was apt to get out of hand when the man was there. Andrew thought he made rash bets with him, and he certainly drank more than usual. It was his duty to look after Dick, but it was getting harder to do so for Elsie's sake, and at times when he thought of his task in this light he had to master a feeling of bitterness. Dick had enough already, if he had the sense to use it well, and he was not good enough for Elsie. Still, if she really loved him, she would be able to keep him straight, and he knew the protective tenderness she felt for the wayward lad. This might be different from the love she could give a lover, but Andrew would not follow up that line of thought. It might lead to false hopes and shabby conduct he would always be ashamed of.

It was near high-water when they left the car at the end of a miry road and struggled across a common to the beach. The roar of the sea filled the air and driving sand stung their faces, but they carried the dinghy down and wading out some distance through the surf got on board. After a few minutes' hard pulling they reached the yacht, and Andrew looked about while he felt the cable.

"The anchor's holding, but perhaps we had better take the kedge farther out," he said.

It cost them half an hour's hard work, for they had to follow up the heavy warp while angry, broken waves splashed into the dinghy, and then, after tearing the anchor out of the sand, row some distance against the drag of the rope. At length, however, Andrew was satisfied, and letting the dinghy drive ashore they carried her up.

"I'm not sure all that was necessary, but it was wiser to make things safe," he said.

Whitney did not answer, and as they passed a sod cabin on the common a man came out.

"Is that you, Jock?" Andrew asked. "It's a wild night, and when Mr. Staffer told me what you said I thought I'd come down to see how the boat was riding."

"It's wild enough," agreed the other, and Whitney recognised him as the man who had come on board on the morning after their arrival. "What was it Mr. Staffer said?"

"I can't remember exactly, but I understood you thought the boat might drag," Andrew said.

"Weel, I wouldna' say that was impossible, but ye hae good ground tackle."

Whitney, who was beginning to understand the Scots, looked hard at him, but could not see his face well.

"And Mr. Staffer sent ye off in his car to see if she was a' right?" Marshall resumed.

"I don't know that he sent us. He said we could use the car."

"He's a thoughtful man, but I wouldna' say Watson would be pleased; he'd be wanting to wash her," Marshall remarked. "Onyway, ye needna' fash about the boat. I'll be here until the tide rins doon and if onything needs doing, I'll see til it."

"Thanks," said Andrew. "Do you know if one of the whammel boats has gone west?"

"Yin's gone; I dinna ken where. A shooting man frae Edinbro' bought Tam Grahame's *Nance*. Him and another took her off soon after ye came."

“ How do you know he was an Edinburgh man ? ”

“ There was a Waverley label on his portmanteau and he didna’ speak like us. Still, I alloo it might have been Inverness.”

“ And the man who was with him ? ”

“ Ye canna’ tell where a man comes frae when he keeps his mouth shut, but he was a sailor by the way he handilt the gear.”

Andrew asked no more questions, and they went back to the car, while, when they reached Appleyard, Dick met them in the hall.

“ I’ve found a way of letting you have your shooting,” he said in an apologetic tone. “ Young Ross will go with you, and I don’t think there’s a snipe in the mosses he doesn’t know about. If there’s any sport to be had, he’ll see you get it.”

“ I suppose this means you’re going with Williamson ? ” Andrew remarked.

“ I really want to go, if you don’t mind very much. I may be back before you leave and you’ll only be away a week.”

“ That’s so,” said Andrew. “ Well, you’d better bear in mind what the doctor told you.”

He moved on, frowning, and presently found Elsie in the drawing-room.

“ I did my best, but Dick’s going with Williamson,” he said. “ You didn’t want him to ? ”

“ No,” she answered frankly, but with some embarrassment. “ Of course, there’s no obvious reason for our interfering.”

“ That was my difficulty. Dick will soon be master here. I’m only his guest, and Williamson is a friend of Staffer’s. Nobody knows anything against the man.”

“ And yet——” Elsie said, and stopped.

“ I’m vexed ? You can take it that I don’t like to be beaten, particularly by my youthful cousin,” Andrew, who wished to allay the uneasiness he thought she felt, answered with a smile.

Then Staffer and Mrs. Woodhouse came in and the party broke up for the night. Whitney, however, followed Andrew to his room.

"I guess you noticed the coincidences that happened this evening," he said.

"I feel rather annoyed by Dick, if that is what you mean," Andrew replied in a discouraging tone.

Whitney smiled. "It isn't that altogether. You tried to stop his going with the fellow and had nearly succeeded when Staffer mentioned the boat. Afterwards we met Marshall, who hinted that Staffer might have mistaken his remarks about the necessity for your looking after the craft. Then we came back and found that Dick had changed his plans. I reckon it's curious how things fitted in."

"Very curious!" said Andrew. "But I've known for some time that Staffer was clever."

Whitney nodded. "I'm afraid that neither of us is quite up to his mark, but I've a notion that Mac-kellar's on his trail, and if you need me, why I'm ready. Now I've gotten on delicate ground, but you're playing a straight game, and I want you to win. It would be a fine thing for you to save the lad, and Elsie expects it, while Staffer knows he's up against you. Keep it at that; it's quite enough for the present."

"Then you mean there's something else going on," Andrew said in a curious quiet voice.

"I feel there is, which is all I can tell you. You want to let Staffer think you're only fighting him for your cousin. He can understand that and won't suspect you of guessing he's engaged in another game. I'll play up to you as much as I can. Staffer doesn't take much stock in me."

"But what object can he have?"

"Can't say," Whitney answered. "He may be forced to show his hand. However, I've given you something to think about, and I'll get to bed."

Next morning Dick started for London with Williamson. He let himself go when he got there, and with his companion's help spent several days and the greater part of several nights in exciting amusements and adventures. It was not often the sparkling cup of pleasure was held out to him full, and he drained it to the dregs. As one result of this, he did not feel up to the mark until after lunch, but Dick was something of a philosopher and knew one cannot get anything without payment. Besides, if quietness was good for him, it was to be had in abundance at Appleyard.

For all that, when he left Euston at midnight, a reaction had begun, and he wondered whether he had made the pace too hot. On reflection, however, he suspected that it had rather been made for him and he had been tactfully encouraged to fall into his companion's stride. Well, he had had a glorious time, but he wished his head did not ache so badly and he could get rid of the unpleasant, shaky feeling that troubled him, because there was some business he must talk over with Williamson before they reached Rugby.

"We had better get things settled now," he said. "Your friend, Marsden, has my note for thirty pounds, but you paid the other fellows, as well as for that supper and the hotel bill. How much am I in?"

Williamson, who took out his pocket-book, told him, and Dick got a shock.

"I knew I was going it, but this is a bit of a facer!" he exclaimed. "Forty pounds in an evening, besides the other things, is pretty hot, particularly as I have just half a sovereign left."

"You needn't be disturbed about it. Your promise is good enough; I can wait."

"We can't leave it at that," Dick objected and added with a forced grin: "Besides, you might have to wait some time."

"Then what do you propose?"

Dick wished his head was clearer; he was getting dizzy.

"I thought you might see Craven and arrange the thing with him. Of course, he's holding a lot of my paper, but he gets good interest."

Williamson produced a fountain pen and a sheet of paper. "Very well. As it happens, I expect to meet him to-morrow."

It struck Dick that the man was suspiciously prompt ; indeed he seemed to have been waiting for the request, but the lad felt he needed air and opening the window leaned out. It was a dark night and the express was travelling fast. Its lights sped smoothly along the black hedgerows beside the line and flashed across water lying on swampy fields. Blurred trees raced past, twinkling points were suddenly pricked in the obscurity a mile away and then rushed back and vanished, and a faint glimmer flickered in the sky ahead. Dick thought this marked Rugby, and sitting down again, pulled himself together.

"I'll make it enough to cover everything and put us straight," he said as he took the pen.

He found writing difficult, for the bracing effect of the cold wind was wearing off, but the note was written and after putting it into his pocket-book Williamson looked at his watch.

"We're due in a few minutes. Will you get down and have a drink ? You don't look very fit," he said.

"No," said Dick, who imagined that if he left the carriage he might not get back. "I expect if I'd had fewer drinks in town I'd feel better now."

Then the speed began to slacken and Williamson collected his belongings. Dick handed him his coat as the train stopped, but did not shake hands with him. Somehow he felt he would rather not. After a careless good-bye, Williamson jumped down, and Dick sat in a corner, struggling against the faintness that was overcoming him. He would feel better when the train started, but he must be alone ; he could not have people looking at him while he felt as he did.

Nobody else got in ; he heard the guard's whistle and the engine pant. There was a jerk and the lights on the platform drifted past, but his head was reeling and he could not get his breath. Falling away from the corner, he made a half-conscious effort to keep on the seat, and for some time afterwards remembered nothing.

He was roused by a rattle that swelled into a roar, and getting up shakily, saw the lights of a station flash past. There were other lights all round, running back into the distance in rows, while the red glow of fires that streamed above the roofs seemed to indicate a manufacturing town. Dick noted this vacantly, for he felt weak and cold. They must be in Lancashire, and he had lain in a dead faint for a long time. With difficulty he pulled up the window and got back to his corner.

"If this kind of thing happens often, the fellows who hold my notes will get a painful shock," he said, with a wry smile, and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE WRECK.

PALE moonlight trembled across the foaming sea and went out again as the *Rowan*, rolling hard, bore up for the Solway. Whitney held the helm, his lips set and his brows knitted, for with the savage wind astern the yacht was hard to steer. The small storm-jib ran water as it swung above the seas, and the black, close-reefed mainsail lurched to and fro, lifting its heavy boom high above Whitney's head, at the risk of carrying away the mast if he let it gybe across. Andrew stood in the cockpit, with the spray rattling like shot on his oilskins ; his night glasses steadied on the cabin top as he searched the sea ahead and he saw enough to daunt a stranger to the firth.

The hills along its western shore were indicated by a vague blackness devoid of outline, but he could

distinguish a belt of broken water that stretched across his course and faded into the gloom. The backs of the seas were towards him and he noted how their crests were cut off by the wind as they curled against the tide, which was running down the firth. In some places their length and regularity indicated depth of water, but, for the most part, they boiled in frothy confusion across the shoals. A steady beam of light stretched out from the shore, but this was not much guide to the intricate channel through the sands. By and by the moon came out, and as its light widened, smooth, bright patches became visible amidst the turmoil. These were the tops of the banks that the tide was leaving. Andrew put down the glasses and, stooping under the cabin hatch, lighted his pipe.

"It's rather late to try for Rough Firth. I'm not sure I could find the Barbara Deep if we let her run. If we missed it and went ashore, she'd soon break up."

"That is not to be thought of."

"Well, I suppose the proper thing would be to set the trysail and try to beat her out, but with the tide knocking up the sea, she'd nearly wash us off when she came on the wind."

"I expect so," said Whitney. "She's wet enough running before it, and I don't feel like pumping hard all night. Can't you think of another plan?"

Andrew occupied himself with the bearing of the light, while Whitney braced his aching arms against the tiller. He was tired, for they had spent several nights pushing the dinghy across the flats at the head of a distant bay and a couple of bernicle geese and some mallards lay in the forecastle. The last night had been passed rolling violently at anchor on a disturbed swell, and they had been at sea since dawn in weather that made cooking impossible and demanded constant watchfulness.

"I think," said Andrew presently, "I could find the Horseshoe Spit, and we'd get shelter behind it. In fact, the sea shouldn't get in at all after half ebb

and daylight won't be far off when the tide covers the flats again."

He took the helm and Whitney got down out of the wind and spray. Andrew would tell him when he was wanted, and in the meantime the sight of the wet sands that broke out from the welter of surf was not encouraging. His partner knew his business, but if he made a mistake now, the *Rowan* would probably be hammered to pieces in the next half hour. Fortunately, the moonlight got brighter, and when Andrew called him they were running up a channel with a strip of glistening sand astern and a wild turmoil of foaming water close on their port hand. This, no doubt, marked the Horseshoe Spit, across which the tide streamed and met the surf, but Whitney could not see how they had avoided the bank astern. He was, however, not given much time to look about.

"Stand by the big anchor," Andrew said. "Drop it when I tell you and let the kedge go after she sheers."

The *Rowan* came up head to wind and Whitney was hard at work for the next few minutes ; handling heavy chain that ran out furiously and then stopped until he dragged more up from below, paying out the thick kedge-warp that coiled all about the deck, and lashing the thrashing jib to the bowsprit. Then he and Andrew got the mainsail down and the boat rode to her moorings, though she was not at rest. Sometimes the wind drove her up against the tide and the short waves washed on deck ; sometimes the current swept her back, while the tightening cable rang and it looked as if she must drag her anchors and ground upon the surf-swept bank. After watching her for a few minutes, Andrew seemed satisfied and they went below, where Whitney lighted the stove.

"I've only eaten a lump of wet bread and as much canned beef as I could pull off the slab without taking it from the tin, since morning, and now I want a meal," he said.

“Then, you’ll have to hold the fry-pan on, and trim the table cleverly if you want to keep the food off the floor.”

“I’ll try. There’s a charm in small boat sailing, but it’s a charm that only gets you by degrees, and one finds it hard to say what it consists of on nights like this. I don’t like being wet and hungry, and I hate to feel cold, and yet here am I, in a gale of wind, behind the Horseshoe Spit!”

“It’s curious,” said Andrew, smiling. “I expect there are instincts in human nature that neither of us understands. But you had better watch your job; you’re running the ham fat all over the stove.”

Whitney dished the ham and made some coffee, cut a loaf that was not very wet, and took out a sticky jar of marmalade. Leaning forward from the lockers, they began to eat, but care was needed in taking things from the table, which swivelled above the centreboard-trunk, since a rash movement would precipitate all it held upon the sloppy floorings. Andrew had an accident with his coffee, and Whitney with some marmalade that fell upon his knees, while he got rather knocked about as he put the things away.

For a time he contrived to lie on the locker, and then knocked out his pipe, and sat listening. The chain cable jarred across the stem, the halyards slapped the mast, and through the shrill scream of wind he heard in deep undertone the roar of the sea.

“It sounds pretty bad, but I’ve been banged about for the last twelve hours and nobody could sleep while this racket goes on,” he said. “Is that sand hard and could one get on to it?”

“I think so, and I’d like to see the channel. We might have some trouble in pulling across, but it will be smoother coming back.”

“Very well,” said Whitney. “Things will be a bit more comfortable then, and I’ve had enough.”

They went on deck, but he half regretted his

suggestion as they launched the dinghy. The moon was covered by driving clouds, and in the darkness the sea raged about the yacht. It was not high, because the tide was falling and the water shoaling fast, but it broke angrily and the air was thick with spray. As soon as the dinghy was overboard they jumped into her and while Whitney got out the oars Andrew pushed her clear of the rolling yacht. The current swept them away, but a furious gust whipped the channel, throwing up a haze of spindrift, and they were blown back past the *Rowan* in spite of Whitney's efforts. It was a minute or two before he could control the craft, but he fought his way to windward until a ridge of wet sand began to shelter them. When this was reached they dragged her up and set off across the bank.

It was hardly possible to see a dozen yards and they struggled on with lowered heads, sinking in oozy patches and splashing into pools. By and by the sand got firmer, and although it had been under water an hour ago, drove past in whistling streams. The surf roared in the darkness with a rising and falling cadence like the roll of giant drums, but every now and then its deep tone was drowned by the scream of the savage wind. The men wore oilskins, sea-boots, and sou'westers, but the spray that swept the bank in a thin mist found out the joints in their clothing. It was difficult to keep one's feet, and Whitney wondered rather anxiously whether Andrew knew where he was going. Still, there was something that braced and exhilarated one in the struggle.

He thought they had gone a mile and a half and must be near the other side of the bank when the moon shone out. The wet sand flashed into brightness and he distinguished a belt of tossing white that was blurred and confused in the foreground but grew into regular, foaming lines farther off. This must be an inlet that pierced the sands, and on looking round a little he saw a dark mass with a pole rising from it some distance away. He touched Andrew, and they made for the object.

Whitney imagined it to be a perch, a spar built into a pile of stones for a beacon. He did not expect to find anything of interest there, but the pole had been raised by human hands, and made a landmark in the storm-swept waste. It brought him into touch with his fellow men in a spot where the strife of wind and sea was daunting. As they got nearer, however, he saw that he had been mistaken. The pole was too thick for a perch, and the black mass below did not consist of stones. Jagged timbers stuck out from the sand like the ribs of a skeleton, but in one place they were clothed with planks and supported a mast. It was obviously a wreck they were approaching.

They stopped to lee of the vessel, and Whitney was glad to get his breath as he studied her. She appeared to have been a schooner of about two hundred tons, but her after part and mainmast had gone. The fore end, however, had escaped destruction, and although the foremast slanted ominously and the topmast and yards had fallen, it still defied the storms. Standing beneath the swell of the bows, the men were out of the wind and could make their voices heard.

"Now I see why I didn't notice a perch on the chart, though I once saw the spar as we came down this side of the Firth," Whitney said. "It's curious they didn't mark the wreck."

"She wasn't here when the last survey was made. A coaster loaded with coal. Somebody tried to get her cargo out, but I understand had to give it up."

Whitney had got his breath, but was silent for a time. He had camped in the silent Canadian forests and by frozen lakes on the vast snowy plains, but did not think he had seen anything so savage and desolate as this strip of surf-beaten sand with the wreck in its midst. Men had hewn her timbers with skilful toil, but the sea had shattered them, and now seemed to challenge all attempts to dispute its power. Whitney was not unduly imaginative, but he felt depressed and

somehow daunted. It was an eerie spot to linger in at midnight in a gale of wind. Still he must not indulge such feelings and he turned to Andrew.

"The fo'castle doesn't seem broken up. Can we get on board?"

"We'll try," said Andrew, and climbing up by the fragments of planking attached to a rib, they reached a strip of deck. It sloped sharply, but Andrew, grasping the ragged bulwark, looked up.

"The iron forestay's holding the mast, and there's a couple of blocks slung round the top," he said. "If it wasn't blowing quite so hard, I'd go up for them." Then he caught a thin rope that ran down from the blocks. "Good signal-halyard; I'd like to take it back, but didn't bring my knife."

Whitney felt amused. Andrew could seldom resist the temptation of picking up anything that might be of use on board his yacht. Indeed, her fore-castle was cumbered with what Whitney called truck, which his comrade had found or bought cheap.

"I expect it's rotten anyhow," he said.

"No," said Andrew, "it feels sound. However, I might come for it another time." He moved forward a few paces and stopped by two curved beams that rose above a black hole. "The remains of the fo'castle hatch. I wonder what it's like below."

Kneeling on the wet deck, he struck a match, which blew out, but the next burned for a moment or two, and Whitney saw the light flicker on dripping planks and bulging beams. It was obvious that the water flowed into the vessel and he wondered at Andrew's curiosity. The dark hole did not look inviting and he was anxious to return to the yacht in good time. Still, it was bitterly cold standing in the wind.

"We'll go and see, but I'll let you drop down first," he said.

Andrew seized the carline-beam and vanished through the gap. There was a splash below, and he called to

Whitney to be careful how he came down. As this was impossible, Whitney let go the beam and touching the vessel's keelson with his foot, fell against her planking. It jarred him, but he got up and Andrew struck another match and stooping down picked something out of the water that lay among the timbers.

"A bit of candle," he exclaimed. "It's going to burn."

It did so after he had scraped off some smouldering wick and stuck it on a massive oak knee. The wrecked bulwarks broke the wind, for only draughts came down, and the light spread about the forecastle. There was some sand in the vessel's bottom, and the floor and ceilings had gone. Nothing remained but the heavy timbers and the planks bolted fast to them. A few shrimps sped up and down a pool and a small crab that made a crackling noise crawled into a corner. Andrew examined the beams and knees with interest.

"These old vessels were very well built," he said. "They used picked material, cutting out the sapwood and seeing that the grain followed the curve where there was any shape. She broke up aft in pounding with the coal on board, but now it's gone, this part of her may stand a long time. Good, salted oak will last for many years under water."

"How did they get the coal away?" Whitney asked.

"They didn't get much," said Andrew, feeling under his oilskins for his pipe. "I wasn't here when they tried to salve it, but I believe they used carts."

"Then you can reach land at low water?"

"They must have been able to reach it then, though I'm not sure you could do so now, because the channels are continually changing. It's possible they had to drive through water that may have got deeper since, while the tide would not allow them much time for work. I daresay that stopped the undertaking and haulage would be expensive, because it's two or three miles from the beach."

"How long is it since they let up?"

"About two years; I can't say exactly." Andrew stopped to light his pipe and resumed with a smile: "Do you think of trying for the coal?"

"I was wondering whether the folks who quit the business left that candle. Would a candle burn after rolling about for two years in salt water?"

"I don't know; it's an interesting point," Andrew thoughtfully replied, and moved towards a timber from which he scraped a patch of grease. "It was stuck on here when it was used and that must have been after she took the sharp list. If she'd been upright, the flame would have scorched the knee and I see no sign of that."

"Would she list over when she struck the bank?"

Andrew knitted his brows as if the question was important. "I'm not sure. She'd have a full cargo and these vessels are built with flat floors to lie on the ground. It's only westerly breezes that drive much broken water up the Firth, and though she lists to the east, she hasn't gone very far over yet."

"In short, the chances are that she stood nearly upright when they were working at the coal."

"Yes," said Andrew gravely, "I think she did."

Whitney was silent for a moment or two, listening to the turmoil of the sea and the uproar of the gale that filled the shadowy hold with confused sound, through which he heard the steady trickle of water running out on the sand. He felt that the wreck had a secret.

"You must see what I'm getting after," he remarked. "It looks as if somebody had been here since the salvors gave her up."

Andrew nodded. "The blocks on the masthead are not the kind they'd use for heaving cargo out, besides which they'd want a gaff. Then the signal-halyard felt quite good."

"If you wanted to get on board, would you take a whammel boat?"

"It depends. A whammeler couldn't get alongside if it was blowing from the west, and since the tide runs out fast she'd have to leave early on the ebb. If she came on the flood, the wreck would soon be covered."

"Then anybody who meant to get on board would, if possible, walk across the sands, which narrows things down. Now we come to another point. Why would anybody wish to board her?"

Andrew said nothing for a minute and then answered thoughtfully: "Of course, I've seen where you were leading. The signal-halyard would lift the steel triangle they use with a wireless installation, and they'd get some height at the masthead, while I understand the messages travel farthest at night, when the operator wouldn't be seen crossing the sands. I don't know if he could carry the necessary apparatus, but he might hide it in a watertight box. The candle will be out in a minute, so we can't look."

"You don't know yet if he could cross the sands."

"That's true. I'm going to find out. You had better get up while the light lasts."

Whitney reached the deck with some difficulty, and it was dark below when Andrew joined him.

"We haven't much time to lose if we're to see whether it's possible to get here from the beach," the latter said.

They dropped over the side and set off across the bank. The wind buffeted them and driving sand rattled on their oilskins. Whitney hoped that Andrew was going straight, because the moon was obscured again, and the Solway tide rises remarkably fast. For a time they saw nothing but shallow pools in winding hollows and balls of foam that seemed half solidified as they blew along the ground. Whitney thought it must be past low water, but Andrew trudged quietly on and he made no protest. At length, they came to a broad stream of water, and he noted with mixed feelings that there was no way of getting round. He was not sorry that it threatened to stop their advance,

but his comrade was not easily daunted and might try to wade across.

"As there's not likely to be another big gutter between us and the beach, it would be a pity to turn back now," Andrew shouted.

"Then I'll wait and see how you get on," Whitney replied.

Andrew plunged in, and was soon knee deep. When he had gone a few yards farther, the water splashed about the skirts of his oilskin jacket and he came out.

"We might have crossed, but the bottom's soft, and there's some stream," he said.

"Which way is it running?"

"Up, but not very fast yet."

"Then we're going back at once," Whitney said firmly.

They started, and Whitney did his best as he heard the growl of the surf grow louder. It would be remarkably unpleasant to find themselves cut off from the dinghy, and there were several gutters, up which the tide would soon make its way, to be crossed. Andrew seemed to realise this, for he went on at a steady trot, the water pumping in his sea-boots, but it was easier to make progress with the gale behind them, and Whitney felt relieved when they passed the wreck at some distance. Andrew was heading straight across the sands, though Whitney could not tell what he was steering by. After a time, they came to a stretch of water that widened as they splashed through, but when they had floundered across the soft sand at its edge and reached a higher level there was no more in sight. Breathing hard, they made their way across firmer ground, and Whitney was conscious of keen satisfaction when he saw the dinghy lying a few yards from the glistening water.

When they had launched her, the wind blew them towards the *Rowan*, and they were soon on board. She was riding easier, and would continue to do so for a time.

“Have you decided whether it’s possible to wade out to the wreck?” Whitney asked as they took off their wet oilskins.

“I think it is,” said Andrew. “I daresay there was three feet of water in the gutter that turned us back, but the tides are low now and don’t run out very far. As they get higher, the gutter would dry towards the last of the ebb.”

“The last of the ebb on a big tide would be between five and seven o’clock, and it would be dark then, night and morning,” Whitney remarked. “This means that supposing there was a wireless installation, it could only be used at fixed intervals; roughly speaking, it wouldn’t be available one week out of two.”

“Yes,” said Andrew. “It rather upsets the supposition, but we may find out something more.”

Then he put out the light, and in a few minutes they were asleep.

CHAPTER XV.

MADGE OFFERS HELP.

IT was a bright afternoon, and Elsie sat beside a tea-table on the lawn at Appleyard, with Williamson standing close by. The days were getting short, but the screen of stiff silver-firs kept off the light wind, and strong sunshine warmed the air. It was what the Scot calls a pet day; one borrowed from a finer season, and to be made the most of when winter was close at hand. Madge Whitney, who had come on a week’s visit, lay in a canvas lounge nearer the shelter of the trees, talking to Andrew, and several young men and women stood about the tennis net across the lawn. They seemed to be engaged in a good-humoured dispute and their laughter followed a remark of Dick’s.

Williamson glanced at his companion and saw that

her eyes were fixed upon the lad. They were grave, and her expression was preoccupied, but he did not see the softness he had expected. Indeed, her interest in Dick was puzzling, because he did not think it was altogether accounted for by the hints Staffer had given him, and this was a point upon which he wished to be enlightened. Williamson knew something about women, but, for the most part, they were not women of very high character. With these he was not a favourite, although he was a clever talker and his manners were good.

"You do play tennis sometimes," Elsie said after a silence.

Williamson smiled because her meaning was obvious. "Oh, yes, but one feels lazy now and then, and I imagined you let me stay because you wanted to talk to me! Was I wrong?"

"No," said Elsie, and he noted her unmoved calm.

She was young, but he had not expected shy hesitation or forced boldness from her. He was, however, surprised when she said nothing for the next minute, since he had usually found that an inexperienced antagonist shirked the strain of silence. Then he indicated Dick, who had just returned a difficult ball.

"He plays a good game."

"Dick does a number of things pretty well, although there's none at which he really excels. I don't know which is the more useful——"

"You like a man to have some salient point of skill or character that those who know him can rely upon?"

He noticed her glance wander and did not know that she was half instinctively looking for Andrew, but it rested again on Dick, brooding but calm. Williamson saw that she felt no keen animosity against himself. She knew or suspected that they were, in some respects, opponents, but this did not make her vindictive. She would take the course she had determined on without hating him, which indicated strength of

character, but was too detached an attitude for a young girl fighting for her lover.

"Dick looks better than he did," he said, to give her an opening.

"Yes," said Elsie, fixing her eyes quietly on his face ; "very much better than he did when he came home from town."

Williamson admired her courage, since it was plain that she knew, and did not mean to hide her knowledge of Dick's weaknesses.

"For which you held me to blame ! "

"Partly to blame. Are you surprised ? "

"Well," said Williamson, "I see you're trying to be fair, though I'm half afraid you've failed. But since you meant to raise this point, one must warn you against looking at things out of their right perspective. It makes those in the foreground appear too big."

"You mean one should not exaggerate their relative importance ? "

"Exactly. You must, for example, allow for the exhilarating effect a change of air has on a young man fresh from the country who spends a few days in town. Remember that Dick leads a very quiet and monotonous life at Appleyard."

"A sober life is much the best for him."

Williamson wondered whether she spoke with naïve girlish prudery, because if not, there was something he ought to know.

"Perhaps it's best for everybody, but we don't all like it, and a change is bracing," he answered with a smile. "I suppose you were looking at the thing from the moral standpoint."

"Not exclusively. Dick will soon be master at Appleyard, and that will bring him duties he ought to be fitting himself for. Then you may not know that he is not very strong."

"I guessed something of the kind, but a few late nights and a little excitement can't do much harm."

Elsie looked at him with thoughtful eyes. "Possibly not, in most cases, but they are bad for Dick."

"If you would be quite frank it would help," said Williamson, who was anxious to learn why quietness was necessary for the lad. "We might get on better if we understood each other."

"Have I not been frank? You could hardly have expected me to say as much as I have done. But I am not Dick's doctor."

Williamson felt baffled, but he said, "You have lots of pluck and I imagine you feel I ought to have looked after Dick better. I think that's hardly just, because I have, of course, no control over him."

"You are an older man, and he is easily led. A hint would have gone a long way, and he doesn't resent good-humoured firmness from those he likes."

"You suggest that he likes me?"

"One can't tell," said Elsie in a quiet voice.

"Well, you must see how awkwardly I'm placed. I can't defend myself without attacking Dick, and you wouldn't like that. Suppose I hinted that he insisted on following his bent although I tried to restrain him?"

"Did you?" Elsie asked with a level glance.

Williamson hesitated, which was an unusual thing. He had no sentimental respect for girlish inexperience, but he could not make the direct statement that would have cleared him. He reflected with a touch of ironical amusement that Elsie would not be deceived.

"It was really difficult to interfere, but I did try a tactful hint, which was all that was possible," he said with an indulgent air. "Perhaps the way you regard the thing is natural and deserves some sympathy, but I must own to feeling a little hurt. It looks as if you thought I had some object in encouraging Dick to be extravagant and rash."

"No," said Elsie, in a thoughtful tone; "I can't see what you would gain."

"Well, that's some relief; but what do you want

now? A promise that, at the risk of offending him, I'll be very firm in future?"

Elsie was silent for a moment and then calmly looked up. "I don't think I will ask you for this."

She rose, and Williamson turned away, feeling somewhat annoyed with himself. Elsie had not asked for his promise, because she thought it would not be kept. He had failed to convince her, and her opposition must be reckoned with, while what she had said about excitement being bad for Dick had roused his keen curiosity. The girl was inexperienced and had used no artifice, but he did not think she could have played her part better. Then she had an ally in Andrew Johnstone, who was like her in some respects. Staffer apparently believed that they were not important, but, if this was his real opinion, Williamson thought him mistaken. While he crossed the lawn Madge Whitney watched him with a smile. "That man," she remarked to Andrew, "has just got a set down, but I imagine Elsie has been wasting her time."

"It looks as if you knew what they had been talking about," Andrew replied.

Madge's eyes twinkled. "Why, of course I do. You must remember that I've been here a week, noticing things. Elsie doesn't like the man, and the only reason she could have for talking to him confidentially is that she wanted to warn him to keep his hands off Dick. But I don't think he will."

"Ah!" said Andrew, rather sharply. "It's curious that you——"

He stopped, and Madge asked: "Shall I finish what you meant to say? It's curious that although I haven't had much opportunity of seeing what is going on, I should agree with the conclusion you have come to after mature deliberation. Well, if you're afraid of complimenting me on my cleverness, you can account for it by remembering that I'm an American. Of course, this doesn't make me anything the less of an outsider."

“I didn’t mean that you were an outsider,” Andrew began.

“Perhaps you didn’t. It was your Scottish reserve that made you hate to talk about your family affairs, but Jim, who counts you as his partner, has told me something. Then I don’t mind owning that I like you and admire what you are trying to do. However, we had better keep to the point. Williamson’s leading your cousin into extravagance with some object.”

“I believe that’s true,” Andrew quietly agreed. “After all, you were right, to some extent, about my reserve ; but now if you can help me I’ll be very glad. It isn’t an easy job I have undertaken.”

“Very well. I’ll begin by telling you something. The evening Williamson arrived, I was coming down to dinner before the rest ; I afterwards found my watch was fast. When I got to the gallery at the top of the stairs I stopped ; it’s rather dark where you come out of the passage, you know. Dick was standing by the fire in the hall and his manner indicated that he was waiting for somebody. Well, though it was not my business, I stepped back into the shadow to watch. Perhaps this was wrong, but a hint at intrigue has a fascination for me. By and by, Williamson came out of the opposite passage and went downstairs, but his quick glance round showed he wanted to be sure there was nobody but Dick about. I saw Dick’s face, and it was eager. Williamson gave him two or three bits of paper that looked like bank-notes.”

“If Dick had given them to Williamson, I could have understood it better,” Andrew remarked.

“Yes ; the explanation would then have been obvious, but what I saw suggests something graver. Dick went away, looking relieved, but Williamson, who moved towards the stairs, turned back, and a few moments afterwards Staffer came in. He said, ‘So you have seen him !’”

Andrew made an abrupt movement, but said nothing,

and Madge resumed : " I suppose you see the significance of this ? "

It was plain to Andrew that Staffer had known, and, no doubt, approved of, the transaction between Williamson and Dick.

" Yes ; I feel disturbed about it."

" Well," said Madge. " I went back quietly and didn't come down for some time, but I watched the three men at dinner. Williamson spoke to Dick as if he had not seen him since he came, and Dick said he was sorry he wasn't able to meet him at the station. In fact, they rather overdid it, and Staffer seemed to think so, because he stopped them. Then, perhaps, it was because he felt relieved, Dick——"

She stopped, and Andrew suggested grimly : " Drank more than usual ? I noticed that. Well, since you have seen so much, I'm glad to have you on my side, particularly if you can tell me what I ought to do. I'll admit that I don't know."

" I think you should watch and do what seems plainly needful, but nothing more. Don't try to make any clever plans, at which the others would beat you, and take Mackellar into your confidence."

" You haven't met him," Andrew said in surprise.

" Jim has, and I know what he thinks of him. But I've probably said enough and Williamson is watching us. I dare say he suspects whom we're talking about."

Andrew went away and soon afterwards left Appleyard in the side-car, while Whitney let the high-powered bicycle go when they turned into the main western road. It runs, straight and level, along the Solway, and they reached Dumfries in an hour. Mackellar had not left his office and in five minutes Andrew had made the situation plain. Mackellar pondered it silently for a time, and then looked up.

" Weel," he said, " it gets interesting and I must set to work. I'll let ye know when I have anything to report."

Andrew, who knew his man, was satisfied with this, and, driving home at full speed, he and Whitney arrived before their absence had been remarked. Williamson left next morning, and Madge Whitney a few days afterwards, and nothing of importance happened during the following week, but Mackellar had, in the meantime, been carrying out a plan that was to have some influence upon Williamson's affairs.

CHAPTER XVI.

MACKELLAR DROPS A HINT.

THERE was no Sunday delivery of letters and one Monday morning Williamson sat rather anxiously watching the road outside a small country house beside the Tweed. One of the tall gateposts at the end of the drive had sunk to a slant and the gravel had not been rolled or raked for some time. The borders round the lawn hinted at economy in bedding out and gardener's hire, and the old house had a dilapidated look. These things were significant and explained why Williamson had been received there as paying guest, with the privilege of some rough shooting and salmon-fishing.

He could have found cheaper quarters, but the place suited him. For one thing, his residence there gave him a certain standing in the country, and his host, a decayed Scottish gentleman, was getting old and left him alone. He could go and come as he liked without exciting remark, and the people he met were well bred and not imaginative. Since he had been received by his host, they took it for granted that he was a man one could be friendly with.

By and by the postman dismounted from his bicycle at the gate. It is customary in that neighbourhood to meet the post, but Williamson sat still, as if he did not expect any letters. The man, however, gave him

two or three before he went on to the house, and Williamson, who put them down, carelessly lighted his pipe. He had learned to exercise caution in such details, though he felt disturbed as he recognised the writing.

The first curtly reminded him that payment for the hire of a motor-car was two months overdue. The second enclosed a statement of a fashionable tailor's account, which included an expensive fur coat, but there was no difference in the hand. Williamson knew it well, because he had two or three similar demands in his pocket-book. Each ended with an intimation that unless payment were made within a specified time, proceedings would be taken to enforce it.

Williamson put down the notes and vacantly looked about. Not far away, the Tweed, sparkling in the sunshine, ran through a wooded hollow where beeches gleamed ruddy brown among sombre firs. Two men with guns upon their shoulders were crossing the steep stubble that glittered with melting hoar frost on the breast of a neighbouring hill, and a keeper with a couple of setters stood at the gate. Williamson was to have gone shooting with his host, but he must excuse himself, because he had something else to think about.

His expenses were heavy, for it was important that he should pass for a sporting man of means, and he was a good shot and skilful with the salmon rod. As a rule, he had money enough for his needs, but his supplies had been irregular since the war began, and as he had luxurious tastes his debts had mounted up. Of late, his creditors had grown impatient, but it was curious they should all have asked the same lawyer to enforce their claims. Since this could not have happened by coincidence, it looked as if somebody, who must have taken a good deal of trouble to investigate his affairs, meant to put some pressure on him. This was alarming, for several reasons, and as he could not pay his debts in the time allowed, he determined to call upon the lawyer and see what he could find out.

There was, however, another matter that demanded attention, and as he took up a letter with the Newcastle postmark the Tweed drew his eyes again. It reminded him of a wider river with older associations ; a river where terraced vineyards rose steeply from the water-side, instead of the rounded Scottish hills, and barges slowly floated past ancient towns. His expression changed and grew resolute as he thought of it.

Opening the envelope he found, as he expected, a short note folded round a letter. The note said he would, no doubt, like to hear how Jack was getting on in Holland, and ended with a few references to mutual acquaintances. The letter was of some length, and narrated in gossiping style its writer's business journey to several Dutch towns. Williamson, however, knew that there was more in it than met the eye, and went to excuse himself from joining the shooting party. After this, he spent some time studying the letter in his room, and, when he had burned it, was driven to the station. Booking to an old country town, he called at the lawyer's office and was received by a suave, elderly gentleman.

"It was my unpleasant duty to send you these notices," said the latter with an apologetic air. "I appreciate your prompt response, and expect the little matter will now be put right. You must admit that the creditors have exercised some patience."

"But don't mean to do so any longer?" Williamson suggested. "That is really what I came to see about."

"Well," said the lawyer thoughtfully. "I daresay you understand that the war has made money tight. My clients inform me that they find themselves compelled to press for outstanding accounts and take a course that in a happier state of things they would not employ."

"Then I am to understand that these notices will be acted upon."

"I think you can take that for granted," the lawyer

answered in a deprecatory tone. "However, there is a way in which you can obviate all trouble to yourself and me ; I mean by paying what is due at once."

Williamson looked at him with a rather grim smile. "It sounds simple, but there are difficulties. Now, I can pay these bills, but not in the time mentioned. Have you power to extend it ? "

"No ; but if you will make me an offer I will consult my clients."

"That would cause some delay. As I want the matter settled, I would prefer to call upon the man who has brought it to a head. Will you tell me his name ? "

Williamson had hoped to catch the lawyer off his guard, but his amused expression showed him that he had failed.

"There are several names. You know the people."

"Of course, but suppose you admit that I have some intelligence and try to look at the matter from my point of view."

"It would be difficult, for the want of practice," the lawyer answered dryly. "I have no debts."

"Still, if you had several creditors who lived in different places and simultaneously put their claims in the hands of one particular lawyer, what would you think ? "

"It might be accounted for simply," the other answered with a modest air. "I believe I am known as a businesslike, trustworthy man."

"I don't doubt it, but suspect another explanation. There is somebody behind these people who has persuaded them to stop my credit or has bought up the debts. He must have a reason for this, and if I could talk it over privately with him, it would simplify things."

"I'm not so sure that follows," said the lawyer. "All I can tell you is that the bills have been sent to me for collection and unless they are met I shall reluctantly be forced to——"

"Just so," Williamson interrupted. "At present, I cannot say whether they will be met or not. I'm afraid

we must leave it at that. And now I imagine I have taken too much of your time."

A clerk politely showed him out, and going to the station he caught an Edinburgh train. There was nobody else in the compartment he entered, and he sat in a corner, thinking hard. Though he had not learned much he felt that he was right in his surmise. Somebody was trying to put pressure on him through his creditors, and his first guess at his unknown antagonist's object caused him serious alarm. After some reflection he dismissed it with relief as improbable and sought for another explanation.

To begin with, he must discover who his enemy was, and his suspicions centred on Appleyard. Andrew Johnstone was certainly hostile, on his cousin's account, and although Andrew could not have worked out such a plan, it was possible that he had been helped by a cleverer person. This led Williamson to think of Mackellar, whom he had met at Appleyard, and he thought Mackellar was the man. He determined to see him, but could not do so until next day, because a more important matter demanded attention first.

Getting out at the Waverley station, he took a tram, and leaving it on the outskirts of the city walked on to Leith. Here he met a man dressed like a sailor, at dusk, and spent an hour with him in the back room of a public house. When they came out the sailor disappeared in the darkness and Williamson returned to Edinburgh, where he dined and slept at a fashionable hotel. Next morning he went to Glasgow, and left it shortly after his arrival, by the South Western line, which took him to Dumfries, but it was not without a reason he had travelled by three different railways. Williamson generally tried to cover his tracks.

After lunch at the station hotel, he walked down the narrow High Street and stopped at a garage, where he ordered a motor bicycle to be ready in half an hour. After that he passed the old Mid Steeple and turned

downhill towards the waterside, but came back presently by narrow streets to a square of handsome offices. Entering one with Caledonian Weavers on its plate-glass windows, he sent in his card and was asked to wait a few minutes.

As it happened, Mackellar was then talking to Andrew, who had brought Whitney with him, in his private room, and he smiled as he showed them Williamson's card.

"Maybe ye had better ask Mr. Davies to let ye out by the back," he said. "If ye call again in half an hour, I may have some news."

They went out and as they reached the street Andrew said to Whitney, "I wonder how Williamson got here. There's no train that connects with the North British."

"Came in a car, perhaps," Whitney suggested. "Somehow, I feel I'd like to find out. Let's try our garage; everybody puts up there."

They went into the garage and Whitney began to make an unnecessary adjustment to the engine of his bicycle, for he had driven Andrew from Appleyard in the side-car. "I suppose Mr. Williamson comes here when he's in town?" he said to a man at work close by.

"He does," the other answered. "He's in town the noo."

"Did Mr. Staffer bring him in his car?"

"She's no' in the yard, and Mr. Williamson's for Castle Douglas." The man indicated the motor bicycle he was busy with. "I'm tightening her up for the run, no' that she needs it much. Mr. Williamson kens a good machine and always asks for her."

"Is there anything doing at Castle Douglas to-day?"

"No' that I've heard of. He's for the moors I'm thinking. There's a gun-case to be strapped on the carrier; but if ye're wanting to see him ye must leave word at the office. I'll be away at another job before he comes in."

"It doesn't matter ; we may meet him," Whitney answered carelessly, and he and Andrew strolled away.

"Well," he said, after a few minutes, "we have learned something. It seems Williamson's in the habit of hiring a bicycle here. Has he any friends in Galloway who might give him some shooting ? "

"None that I know of," Andrew replied with a puzzled look.

"I guess you remarked that he makes a curious choice of a machine. She's good—I know that make—but I can't see why he picks a single-cylinder lightweight when they've several full-powered machines on the stand. Looks as if he expected he'd have to wheel her. What's the Castle Douglas road like ? "

"It's the highway to the West, and we keep our main roads in good order."

"You certainly do," Whitney agreed. "Anyhow, I stick to my opinion that he has some particular reason for choosing a light machine." Then he looked hard at Andrew. "I don't want to butt in, and as the fellow's a family friend, it's delicate ground ; but if you feel you'd like a run through Galloway——"

"Perhaps we had better go, but we'll first see what Mackellar has to say."

They walked down to the bridge foot, to pass the time, and in the meanwhile Mackellar received Williamson civilly and indicated a chair.

"You wished to see me ? " he said.

Williamson took out the bills and lawyer's letters and put them on Mackellar's desk. "I wonder whether you know anything about these ? "

"I know the gentleman who seems to have charge of the matter. Why do you ask ? "

"Because I prefer to deal with the principal instead of an agent. It saves time, and one arrives at an understanding easier."

"In this case there's no great difficulty. Ye have only to pay the bills."

"Just so," agreed Williamson. "They can be paid—that's worth noting—but not just yet."

Mackellar understood this as a hint that the power Williamson's debts gave his antagonist was only temporary.

"In the meantime, ye might be put to some inconvenience," he replied. "One cannot proceed against a man for debt without publicity, which is apt to be damaging, and unpleasant to his friends."

"Exactly. That is what I want to avoid."

"And yet ye cannot pay the bills! Weel, ye are doubtless aware that one gets nothing for nothing, and since ye must ask for some delay, what could ye offer by way of consideration."

"To begin with, I should like to hear what the principal, the man who stands behind my creditors, wanted." Williamson paused and added meaningly: "I expect you know."

Mackellar was silent for a few moments and then said, "I'll no' deny it. Would ye be willing to produce the notes of hand and long-date bills Dick Johnstone has given ye and cancel them on payment of the money lent with current interest up to date? If ye insist, we might allow a little more interest, because ye took some risk."

"I'd be willing to give up one or two," Williamson answered, with some hesitation.

"But no' the rest, which are not in your hands?"

"I suppose I must admit that. But what did you mean by saying I took a risk?"

"We'll talk of that again. Are ye willing to give your word that ye'll lend Mr. Johnstone no more money, make no fresh bet with him, and not help him to negotiate a loan?"

"Is that all, or have you anything more to demand?" Williamson asked with a touch of sarcasm.

"I think the matter could be arranged on the terms I have laid down."

On the whole, Williamson was conscious of relief. To do as Mackellar asked would place him in an embarrassing position, but he had been half afraid of something much worse.

"It needs thought," he said.

"Then I will give ye five minutes ; but it may help ye to decide if I explain why ye took a risk. Ye're maybe aware that there's legislation about a minor's debts."

"Dick Johnstone would not make that excuse for disowning his obligations."

"I'm no' sure ye would have to deal with him," said Mackellar meaningly. "Dick has no doubt been borrowing money on promises to pay when Appleyard is his. Weel, it's no' certain that he'll live until he gets possession."

"Nor may the lenders, for that matter !"

"Verra true," Mackellar agreed. "For a' that, the chances against Dick's reaching twenty-one are greater than usual. It seems ye do not know that two doctors would not pass him for the army."

"On what grounds ?" Williamson asked with some sharpness.

"A weak heart that might stop the first time he was over-excited or over-exerted himself."

Williamson was silent for some moments. He knew Dick was not strong, but Staffer, who must have known the truth, had not told him how grave the danger was.

"Still, suppose the worst happened. The new owner would not repudiate his kinsman's debts."

"Who do ye take the heir to be ?"

"Staffer."

Mackellar looked at him with dry amusement. "Did he tell ye so ?"

"No," said Williamson thoughtfully. "I can't remember that he ever did, which is strange, because I understood from the beginning that——"

"Appleyard would be his ? Weel, perhaps I may tell ye something about the family's affairs. Dick's father

left the house and land to the lad, with a reversion to the next o' kin, in case he died before inheriting. Mistress Johnstone got a separate portion and power to manage the estate for her son's benefit until he came of age, subject to the approval of the executors. She could appoint a guardian for the lad, to superintend his education, but she could not alienate a yard of land. It was not a will that I approved of, but Mr. Johnstone was very ill when he made it and did not listen to my objections. Maybe he hardly expected his widow to marry again. Mr. Staffer, who acted as steward for his wife, now acts for Dick, but there his interest ends."

"Then, in the event of Dick's death, who gets the estate?"

"Andrew Johnstone."

Williamson got something of a shock. Staffer, whom he had regarded as the next heir, had not been straight with him, and he knew that Andrew would be difficult to deal with. Besides, if Dick did reach twenty-one Staffer's influence would cease. Mackellar was right; a serious risk attended the discounting of bills by which the lad raised money for gambling and similar extravagances. Since Staffer had played him a shabby trick in leaving him in ignorance, Williamson need not consider him and could look after his own interests.

"Very well," he said, "I'm ready to give you the promise you want if we can come to terms."

"Then I'll pay off any notes of Dick's that ye may bring me, with interest at two per cent. above the bank rate. If this will not enable ye to satisfy your creditors, I'll engage that they will give ye another six months."

"It's enough," said Williamson. "Still, I expect you see that when I have satisfied them your hold on me has gone."

Mackellar smiled. "Verra true, but I believe I've shown ye that it would be wiser to leave Dick alone. I'm thinking ye have sense enough to take a hint and keep your word."

“You’ll find that I mean to do so,” Williamson replied.

He went out, and soon afterwards Andrew and Whitney came in. Mackellar told them what Williamson had promised, and then remarked: “The man might have been dangerous, but we need not fear any further trouble from him. There are two points worth noting, though I cannot tell whether they concern us or not. He’s anxious to avoid anything that might damage his credit and make him leave this part of the country; and expects some money before long. Can ye account for this?”

Andrew could not, and a few minutes later went out with Whitney, who looked at his watch as they turned into the High Street.

“I guess we’ll make for the garage and pull out for Castle Douglas as soon as we can,” he said. “Our man must be some distance ahead.”

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CASTLE DOUGLAS ROAD.

FOR a few minutes the bicycle and side-car turned in and out of narrow streets between rows of tall, old houses, and then Whitney drove cautiously down the dip to the Nith. There was some traffic on the bridge, and, when they had crossed, carts encumbered the road on the Galloway side. Whitney fumed at the delay, but opened out his engine as they entered a stretch of open road, and the wind began to fan Andrew’s face.

For a mile in front of them the river-plain ran level; the stubble shining yellow among squares of pastures and the dark green of turnip-fields; then a ridge of hills rose steeply across their way. The sun that flooded the valley with mellow light was getting low, and while the trees upon the summit of the ridge stood

out sharply distinct, the wooded slopes were steeped in soft blue shadow.

"Looks like a climb," Whitney remarked. "I suppose we go right up there?"

"Maxwelltown braes," said Andrew. "I expect you have heard of them. It's an easy gradient up a long glen."

"Then sit tight, and we'll rush her up on the top gear."

The dust whirled behind them, and the cropped hedge-rows span past; they swung giddily round a curve at a bridge, and the throb of the engine grew louder as they breasted the hill. Dark firs streamed down to meet them, here and there a leafless birch and an oak that gleamed like burnished copper swept by. There was a tinkle of running water in the wood, and, now they were out of the sunshine, the air felt keen. Ahead, the ascending road unrolled like a white riband through faint, shifting lights and lilac shadow.

By and by the glen ran out into a wide hollow that led westwards across a tableland. Low, green hills with gently rounded tops shut off the rugged moors beyond; the shallow vale was cultivated and tame, but the road was good, and Andrew, who was not a motor enthusiast, felt the thrill of speed. Long fields and stone dykes swept behind into the trail of dust; the sun sank towards a bank of slate-coloured cloud. Its rays, which raked the valley, throwing the black shadows of the scattered ash trees far across the fields, hurt Andrew's eyes, but he kept them fixed steadily upon the road. This ran, for the most part, straight and level, but though they were travelling very fast, there was no speeding streak of dust ahead.

After a time a long white village rose from the rolling pasture, and when they ran in among the low houses Whitney pulled up. There was a smith's shop by the roadside, and a man stood outside, holding a cartwheel while another moved a glowing iron hoop amidst the flame of a circular fire.

"You have been watching that tyre heat for a while, I guess," said Whitney.

"Lang enough," the other answered. "She's no stretching weel."

"Then have you seen a small, black motor-bicycle pass?"

"I have not," said the smith. "There was a big grey yin, an' anither with a side-car."

"How long have you been outside?"

"Maybe twenty minutes; maybe a few mair."

"Thanks," said Whitney, who looked at Andrew when he had started the bicycle.

"It's curious. He's travelling light, but I don't think a single-cylinder engine could beat the machine I'm driving by a quarter of an hour. Anyhow, I'll try to speed her up."

The sunlight faded off the grass as they raced away; the slatey clouds rolled higher up the sky, and the wind that whipped their faces bit keen. Andrew was swung to and fro in the rocking car, and sometimes felt uneasy when his comrade dashed furiously round the bends, but for most of the way the road ran straight, and he could see nothing on the long, white streak ahead. After a time they came to a narrow loch, ruffled by the wind, that lay in a lonely, grassy waste, and as they ran past the thin wood on its edge Andrew told Whitney to stop.

"A motor scout," he said, indicating a man in uniform who rode leisurely towards them on a bicycle.

The scout dismounted when they called to him, and said he had left Castle Douglas an hour ago and had kept to the main road, but had not seen a single-cylinder bicycle. They let him go, and Whitney lighted a cigarette.

"Now," he said, "we have got to think. Our man pulled out for Castle Douglas, but hasn't gone there, and my notion is that he didn't mean to. Where's he likely to have headed?"

"It's hard to tell. A road runs north-west to New Galloway, but I can't see what would take him there. It's a small place on the edge of the moors."

"And right away from the Eskdale road!" Whitney remarked, looking hard at him.

"Well," said Andrew quietly, "I'll own I thought of that."

"As a matter of fact, you've been thinking of something like it for quite a time."

Andrew was silent for a moment or two, and then said, "You can understand that the matter will hardly bear talking about, and there was a chance of my being mistaken. However, I now feel it's my duty to get upon the fellow's track, if I can."

"Would you sooner I dropped out?"

Andrew knew the suggestion was prompted by delicacy, but he made a negative sign.

"After all, you know something, and may as well know the rest—if there is anything more to learn. Besides, you're quicker than I am in several ways, and I might want you."

"When you do, you'll find me ready," Whitney answered. "But we'll get back to business. Which way do you suppose he's gone?"

"On the whole, I think south towards Dalbeattie; it's nearer the Solway. As it might be better to follow the road he'd take, we'll have to run back nearly to Dumfries."

"That's all right," said Whitney. "Get in. She seems to be feeling particularly good to-day, and I'm going to let her hum."

They raced back to the eastwards while the distant hills turned grey in front of them, and then turned sharp at a corner to the south. By and by the road skirted a railway line, and Whitney got down at a station.

"Have you seen a small, black motor-bicycle?" he asked a lounging porter.

"I have," said the man. "I mind her because I

thought she was running verra hard for a wee machine. If yon man's a friend o' yours, ye'll no' catch him easy."

"When did he pass?"

"It would be about five minutes after the Stranrarc goods cam' through, and that's an hour ago."

Whitney ran back to the bicycle and jumped into the saddle. "We're on his trail, but he must have come straight and fast from Dumfries. Well, we'll get after him."

The car leaped forward as the clutch took hold, dykes and trees swept down the road, and Criffell's bold ridge rose higher against the eastern sky. Here and there a loch gleamed palely in the desolate tableland, and in the distance a river caught the fading light, but the cloud-bank was spreading fast and the west getting dim. By and by, they saw from the top of a rise a grey haze stretched across a hollow, and Andrew told his comrade that it was the smoke of Dalbeattie. Then a man with a spade and barrow came into view on the slope of another hill, and Andrew asked Whitney to stop. The man, who was cutting back the grass edges on the roadside, had not seen a bicycle of the kind they described.

"There was two that I ken frae Dalbeattie, for by Mr. Maxwell, and the Dumfries grossery man; but that's a'," he added.

"And how long have you been here?"

"Since seeven o'clock this morning."

Whitney started the bicycle slowly, but pulled up when the roadmender was hidden behind the hill.

"We want to talk this over," he said. "Williamson left the road between the station and where we met the man. We know he hasn't gone west or farther south. What about the east?"

Andrew glanced at Criffell, which rose between them and the sea. Its summit cut sharply against the sky, but its slopes were blurred and grey and the stone dykes that ran towards its foot had lost their continuity

of outline. Two or three miles away, to the south-east, the mountain ran down in a long ridge.

"It's obvious that he hasn't gone over the top, but he could cross the shoulder yonder though he'd have some trouble."

"He'd have to leave the bicycle."

"That's so," said Andrew thoughtfully. "A road of sorts runs over the end of the hill, but it doesn't branch off for some distance yet. Another goes to New Abbey between here and the station, and he might reach the moors by what we call a loaning; a green track that sometimes leads to a farm or cothouse and sometimes ends in a bog. Of course, if he found one and crossed the hill on foot, he'd cut the main road from Dumfries round the coast before he reached the Solway beach."

"You're taking it for granted that he'd try to make the beach."

"Yes," said Andrew quietly, "I believe it's what he'd do."

"Well, there are two things to note. He could have gone straight from Dumfries by a good road on the other side of the mountain, but he preferred this way and a rough climb across. Then he started for Castle Douglas, when he might as well have told the garage people he was going to Dalbeattie. Now I expect there's more traffic between Dumfries and the last place, which isn't very far, and they might have heard that he hadn't got there. This implies that he'd a pretty good reason for covering his trail." Whitney paused and looked hard at Andrew. "Before we go any further, you have to decide whether you really want to find that reason out. You can quit the business now, but mayn't be able to do so afterwards."

"I'd sooner stop, but I must go on," said Andrew grimly.

"Very well; we'll try to follow him."

They drove back, passing the roadmender, who leaned upon his spade looking after them, and after

taking another road Whitney pulled up at a broken gate that hung open. A rough track, grown with grass, led away from it between loose stone walls.

"Not intended for automobiles!" Whitney remarked as he cautiously steered between the ruts. "Williamson, who kept the middle, must have found it easier than we do."

Andrew nodded. His comrade's eyes were keen, for only a crushed tuft of grass here and there suggested the track of a bicycle tyre. By and by they stopped at a gate where the loaning forked. One branch ran on; the other turned off, and in the distance a lonely white house showed amidst a clump of bare, wind-bent trees.

"He won't have gone to the farm," said Whitney. "Jump down and open the gate."

They went on again carefully, but after a time the loaning got very rough and rushes grew across it where the ground was soft. After narrowly escaping an upset into the ditch on one side, Whitney stopped.

"I guess this is as far as she'll take us, and I see a peat-stack we could put her behind."

After lifting down a small fir that closed a gap in the wall, they pushed the bicycle across a strip of heath and against a pile of turf; and then stopped to look about.

The light was rapidly going and the wind falling. In front lay a stretch of moor, seamed by black peat-hags, in some of which water glistened, and beyond it rough heather-covered slopes ran up to the black hill-crest. A curlew whistled overhead, and the sharp cry of a grouse rose from the darkening heath. Except for this, it was very still and the landscape looked strangely desolate, but a patch of roof showed faintly among some stunted ash trees not far ahead.

"A cothouse," said Andrew in surprise.

"We'll look at it," Whitney answered, and presently stopped before the building.

One end had fallen down, but half the thatch remained

upon the bending rafters. The rest had gone, and it was plain that the cot had been abandoned for a long time. Crossing a ditch by a rotten plank, they stood knee-deep among withered nettles at the door, and the ruined walls struck a mournful note in the gathering dark.

"There's a track here," said Whitney. "I guess the sheep go in."

He struck a match as they entered, and avoiding stones and fallen beams, they made for the door of an inner room. When they reached it, Whitney struck another match and smiled as he held it up, for the light fell upon a single-cylinder bicycle with a gun-case strapped to the carrier.

"Well," he said, "I half expected this. If we cross the end of the hill going south-east, we should strike the sands somewhere abreast of the wreck?"

"Yes."

"How's the tide?"

"High-water's about one o'clock. That means it's a big tide and, of course, runs out a long way on the ebb."

"Then the sands will be dry and there'll be no gutters to cross. Well, I guess it's a long walk, but we've got to make it. Take your overalls off."

Three or four minutes later they left the cothouse, and struck across the heath when the loaning ended at a tottering fence. There was no track, but Andrew headed for a knoll on the mountain's sloping shoulder. After they left the level, the heather grew tall and strong, brushing about their knees and entangling their feet. Then there were awkward rabbit-holes and granite boulders scattered about, and they bruised their shins as they laboriously plodded upwards. The light had almost gone, and there was nothing visible but the stretch of shadowy hillside in front. Whitney heard Andrew breathing hard, and imagined that his injured leg was giving him trouble.

“ Are we rushing it too much ? ” he asked.

“ I can hold out until we get to the top, and I’ll be all right then. It’s gripping the brae with the side of my foot that bothers me.”

He went on without slackening speed, and the slope grew easier and the light breeze keener. Then the stretch of heather which had shut off their view suddenly fell away, and they looked down through the soft darkness on to a vast, black plain. There was nothing to distinguish land from sea, but a faint cluster of lights that pricked the gloom like pin-points marked the English shore, and farther off the flickering glare of blast-furnaces was reflected in the sky. In the middle distance, a twinkle showed where the Solway lightship guarded the fairway through the shoals, but there was no light near them, nor any sound except the distant murmur of the sea. They stood remote from the homes of men in the mountain solitude. Andrew, stooping behind a mass of granite, struck a match and took out his watch.

“ I imagine we haven’t much time to spare, and wish I knew if the lightship yonder was still riding to the ebb,” he said. “ There’s a burn somewhere below us and running water is generally a good guide down.”

They went on, floundering through tangled heather and falling into rabbit-burrows, until the tinkle of water reached them softly. After that they wound downhill beside the growing burn, past brakes of thorn and hazel and over banks of stones, until a long wood led them to the road. Following the latter for a time they went down again through smooth pasture and turnip-fields and came to a wall that ran along the beach. The empty space beyond it looked black and lonely, and the mournful crying of wildfowl came out of the gloom, but at some distance a beam from a lighthouse cast its reflection upon the sloppy sand.

“ Can you hit the wreck from here ? ” Whitney asked.

"I'll try," said Andrew. "It's a long way, and the tide must be on the turn."

They took off their boots, and as they launched out across the dark level the sand felt sharply cold. Here and there they splashed through pools, but for the most part the bank was ribbed with hard ridges. The shore soon vanished, Criffell's black bulk grew blurred and shapeless against the sky, and they had only the misty beam from the lighthouse for guide. Whitney, however, imagined that Andrew was going straight, which was comforting when they came to a wide depression where water glimmered. He thought this was the channel that had stopped them before, and felt somewhat uneasy as he waded in. There was now no boat they could retreat to on the other side of the wreck.

The water, however, hardly covered his ankles, and some time afterwards Andrew touched his arm as a dim, formless mass rose from the sand. It got plainer as they cautiously approached it, their bare feet falling noiselessly, and in a minute or two they stopped and listened beside the wreck. There was no sound but the drip of water, and Andrew, grasping a broken beam, swung himself up. Whitney followed, his nerves tense, his muscles braced, and held his breath when he dropped into the forecastle. Next moment a pale light sprang up, and he saw Andrew holding out a match. The feeble glow spread along the wet planks and filled the forecastle before the match went out, and Whitney was rather relieved than disappointed to see that nobody else was there.

"We have missed him, but take my box," he said. "They're wax, and burn better than the wooden kind."

Andrew struck another light, which burned clearer. The candle they had used and replaced on the last visit had gone, but two or three matches floated in a pool. He picked them up, and Whitney examined them.

"These are quite fresh," he said. "Looks as if they'd just been struck, though we can't be sure of

that. Extra thick wax, same make as mine ; I got the best I could, because I wanted them to light the bicycle lamp." Then the match burned low, and Andrew threw it down.

"It proves nothing except that the man who used them wanted a good article. The make is well known, but in this part of the country you'd only buy it at a tobacconist's."

"That's a point. Anything is good enough for a fisherman or a sailor to get a light with. The fellow who came here must have meant to have the best."

"After all, the matches don't tell us who he is," Andrew said slowly.

"They don't, but they may help us later. And now we'll hustle for the beach. It would be awkward if we found the tide running up the gutter."

They set off across the sands and waded through the channel without trouble. Reaching land, they put on their boots and laboriously struggled up the dark hill. Both were tired when they floundered down through the heather on the other side, but they found the boggy heath, and by and by the end of the loaning. When they arrived at the cothouse the bicycle had gone, but they had expected this, and made no remark. Shortly afterwards Whitney started his bicycle, and with some difficulty kept out of the ruts and ditch until he turned into the high road. They saw nobody as they sped back to Dumfries, where a drowsy night porter let them in at an hotel.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WILLIAMSON'S MATCH-BOX.

THE dead leaves were driving round Appleyard before a boisterous wind that lashed the granite walls with bitter rain when, one evening, Staffer sat in the drawing-room talking to his sister. Mrs. Woodhouse was a quiet woman, and generally content

to remain in the background, while the influence she exercised at Appleyard was, as a rule, negative. She rarely claimed authority, even over her daughter, or openly interfered, but the things she disapproved of were seldom done. Now her usually placid face was firm.

The drawing-room door was open, and she watched Williamson, who stood near Elsie in the hall. His pose was gracefully easy as he smiled at a remark of the girl's. He looked suave and well-bred, but although she could not hear what they were saying, Mrs. Woodhouse's expression hardened.

"Will that man be here long?" she asked, when Williamson and Elsie moved away.

Staffer gave her a quick glance. He had keen observation and a certain sensitiveness that often proved useful. It was desirable that his relations with Williamson should be cordial, but of late his guest had shown some reserve. It was so slight that Staffer, who knew of no cause for their disagreement, rather felt it instinctively than remarked it by any particular sign. For all that, something had come between them, and he wondered whether his sister was to blame for this.

"It looks as if you didn't wish him to stay," he said.

"I don't," she answered quietly. "His society isn't good for Dick."

Staffer smiled, though he was puzzled. On his last visit Williamson had rather avoided Dick.

"He can't do the lad much harm, and a young man must pay for his education."

"It depends upon what it's worth while for him to learn, and whether the fee is too high or not."

"No doubt," Staffer agreed, with some dryness. "I think you can trust me to see that Dick is not charged too much."

Mrs. Woodhouse did not reply. She was not a clever woman, but she was cleverer than he thought, and he had never understood that in her reserved way she cherished a motherly fondness for Dick. He was

mistaken in imagining he could best appeal to her self-interest.

"After all," he resumed, "it does not look as if Dick would marry Elsie, as we once thought was possible."

"No; Elsie will not marry him, and I would not wish it, if she were willing."

Staffer was somewhat surprised, but he said, "Then why need you bother about the lad? If he indulges in foolish extravagances, it's his affair."

She looked at him with a listless expression. "I don't think you would understand, but I do not want him to come to harm."

"Well, there's something else to talk about. It won't be long before Dick is his own master, and we must leave Appleyard. This will make a big difference, because our means are small and Elsie has been taught no profession. What will she do then, unless she marries somebody?"

"I do not know," said Mrs. Woodhouse in a placid tone.

Staffer mastered his impatience, for his sister sometimes baffled him, and there was a matter of importance about which he wished to sound her.

"I'm sorry you seem to have a prejudice against Williamson. Is it only on Dick's account?"

"No; I feel he may bring trouble to us all. We were happier before his visits began. There is a difference now at Appleyard, and I don't like mystery. Why does he call himself Williamson?"

"Ah!" said Staffer. "You imagine it is not his name?"

"I have known for some time that it is not."

Staffer got something of a shock. His sister had been shrewder than he expected, and he wondered whether anybody else shared her suspicions, but her statement gave him the lead he wanted. "Well," he said, "I dare say you can see that to use his proper name just now might make things unpleasant for him."

“ He did not use it when he first came here, and nobody would have minded it then.”

“ I'm not certain ; these Scots are prejudiced against foreigners, but it's hard to see why you should dislike the man because he is one of us.” He paused and looked at her reproachfully. “ Have you forgotten the people you belong to, Gretchen, and where you were born ? ”

Mrs. Woodhouse's face was troubled, but there was a hint of firmness in her voice as she answered : “ I have not forgotten, but when I married I knew I must choose between my country and my husband's ; one could not belong to both. I chose his ; his people became mine. He was a good man—I think there are not many like him—and I was happy. When he died, I tried to bring up his daughter as he would have done.”

“ You succeeded. Elsie is a Scot,” Staffer remarked, with something of a sneer. “ Then you cast off your country and your relations for good ? ”

“ They were hard and unjust before I left home, but it was not that,” she answered with feeling. “ In their place, I made new friends who had warm hearts and trusted me. Now I have Elsie and Dick and Andrew, and I love them all. Then my husband lies in Scotland with my son, who never grew up, and this means very much. I did not lose them altogether ; they are mine still. I must stay where they lived ; in the way you spoke of Elsie, I am a Scot.”

She stopped and sat quiet with a curious gentleness in her face, but something warned Staffer that she was not to be moved. It was seldom she had shown him her deeper feelings, but she had a mother's heart, against which he could not prevail. She might have made him a useful if not altogether conscious ally, but that idea must be dropped. He had been beaten by a fundamental quality in human nature, and was half afraid he had said too much.

“ Well,” he resumed by and by, “ I'll be content if

you treat Williamson as you would any other guest. You needn't go beyond this, if you'd sooner not."

She turned and gave him a steady glance. "I wish you had nothing to do with him, Arnold—I feel he's dangerous. But I will be polite to him, so long as he does not harm Dick."

"That's all I want," said Staffer, who went away.

While Mrs. Woodhouse sat dreaming by the fire, he entered the billiard-room, where the others had gathered. Elsie was knitting, Dick and Andrew were playing, and Williamson stood looking on. Staffer thought this strange, because Andrew did not play well, and Williamson had generally engaged Dick in a game for a stake.

"Making stockings now!" Staffer said to Elsie. "Whom is this lot for?"

"The Border Regiment."

"The men who're lucky enough to get them ought to feel flattered," Williamson interposed.

"No," said Elsie. "The brave lads are entitled to the best we can send them."

Williamson carelessly examined the work. "This is very neat. Knitting's an essentially Scottish accomplishment. It's useful, which no doubt appeals to a race of utilitarian character."

"That's why I like it," Elsie rejoined. "I am Scottish in all my habits and feelings, you know."

Whitney, who was lounging near, thought there was something half defiant in her voice, but could not tell if Williamson, who smiled and spoke to Dick, noticed it. When the game was finished, Whitney took out a cigarette and walked to a match-holder, which was empty.

"Will you give me a light?" he asked Williamson.

"Certainly," said Williamson, who produced a well-made gun-metal case and then returned it to his pocket. "I think I used the last there, but I have the box I meant to fill it from."

He handed Whitney an ordinary card box containing

pine matches, and the latter, who gave it back after lighting his cigarette, noted that Andrew was watching them. Then he glanced at Elsie, but she was quietly knitting, with her eyes on the stitches.

A few minutes afterwards a servant brought in the afternoon edition of a Glasgow newspaper. Staffer glanced at the front page and then sat down near one of the lamps. There was a certain deliberation in his movements that Whitney noticed, though he admitted that he might not have done so had not the match-box incident roused him to suspicious vigilance. He thought Staffer was waiting for something, but in a moment or two Williamson, who had been talking to Dick, turned towards him. Then Staffer folded back the newspaper.

"The A. & P. liner *Centaur* has gone down in the North Channel," he said. Whitney started, Dick abruptly put down his cue, and Andrew's face grew hard. Then Elsie asked, with a note of horror in her voice: "Do you mean that she was blown up?"

"It looks like that, but there's not much news yet," Staffer replied, and began to read: "'The captain of the Clyde coaster *Gannet*, from Lough Swilly to Ayr, reports that when he was off the Skerries near dark one of the big A. & P. liners passed him at some distance to the north. It was blowing fresh, and hazy, but when the vessel was almost out of sight he noticed a dense cloud of smoke. He ran to the box on the bridge-rail, where he kept his glasses, but when he got them out the liner had disappeared. He steered for the spot where he had last seen her, but it was dark when he reached it, and after steaming about for some time, and seeing nothing but a quantity of wreckage, he made for Rathlin and megaphoned the lighthouse-keepers before proceeding. An unconfirmed report from Larne states that a fishing craft passed a steamer's lifeboat, but lost her in the dark. The *Centaur*, a large and nearly new steamer, left Montreal with wheat and a number of passengers eight days ago."

Nobody spoke for a minute after he put down the newspaper, and Whitney lighted a cigarette to cover his excitement. The news was startling, but he thought it did not take Staffer or Williamson altogether by surprise. There was something curious in the latter's expression. Andrew's face, however, had grown very stern, and Elsie's was angrily flushed.

"This is not war, but murder!" she exclaimed. "The men who blow up unarmed vessels ought to be severely punished."

"When you catch them," Staffer answered. "I expect that will prove difficult, and am afraid we must be prepared for some nasty knocks."

"It's exasperating to be hit hard where you flatter yourself you're secure against attack," Williamson remarked. "The Admiralty must have thought the North Channel safe."

"It ought to be safe, except against treachery," Elsie rejoined. "Don't you think so, Andrew?"

"I do," said Andrew quietly. "It's narrow and commanded by lighthouses and coastguard stations, though perhaps, in a way, its narrowness is a danger. But we must see that this kind of thing doesn't happen again."

"How would you try to prevent it?" Staffer asked.

Whitney gave Andrew a careless glance, and was relieved to note that his grim look had vanished. Andrew's views on the subject would be worth having, but it was obvious that he did not mean to state them.

"I'm not a naval officer but it must be possible to stop the thing." Then Andrew turned to Elsie. "One feels it won't bear talking about."

"Yes," she agreed, with a flash in her eyes. "There's no use in giving way to rage when one is hurt. The best one can do after a treacherous blow is to keep very quiet and wait until the time comes to strike back."

"There's a true Scot!" said Staffer, with a laugh that sounded rather forced. "You're a stubborn,

unemotional race. I wouldn't like to fall into your hands if I'd wronged your friends."

"The Scots are just, and repay both injuries and favours."

Then, by general consent, they talked about something else, and after a time the others went out, and Whitney and Elsie were left alone. He suspected that she had meant this to happen, but he was surprised when she asked him: "Have you a bad memory?"

"I like to think it's as good as my neighbour's," he answered, smiling.

"Then it's strange you lighted a cigarette with a match from your box after asking Mr. Williamson for his."

"Ah!" said Whitney. "Do you think he noticed it?"

Elsie's eyes twinkled. "No; he had his back towards you when you began the next cigarette. But why did you ask for a match when you had some?"

Whitney had recovered from his surprise, and looked at her steadily. "On the whole, I'd sooner you didn't press me for an answer."

"Why? Do you mean you wouldn't tell me?"

"Yes. It would hurt me to refuse."

Elsie looked up quietly. "You're not a good plotter. It was easy to catch you out."

"So it seems. But if I'm not as smart as I ought to be, I mean well."

"I don't doubt it, and I have some reason for trusting you," Elsie said in a thoughtful tone. "I think you're a good friend of Dick's and Andrew's, and their friends are mine."

"Thank you! But Williamson's by way of being a friend of Dick's."

"No," said Elsie; "he pretends he is. You must know this."

"Suppose we admit it. Don't you think Andrew's able to take care of his cousin?"

"I'm glad he has your help."

"Perhaps it's more important that he has yours. We're three to one, which ought to be enough."

Elsie's face was calm, but she was silent for a moment, and Whitney thought she was trying to hide some embarrassment. Then she said, "I'm not sure we are three to one; but was it on Dick's account you asked Williamson for a match?"

"No; that is, not directly. I can't tell you anything more, but since we are friends, can you arrange that there are no matches put beside the bedroom candles?"

"The man is our guest," said Elsie, with some hesitation. "Still, perhaps one mustn't be fastidious when—"

"When there's a good deal at stake; Dick's welfare, for one thing," Whitney suggested.

"Very well," said Elsie. "Now I think we'll join the others."

An hour later, the party broke up. They used oil-lamps at Appleyard, and at night a row of candles in old-fashioned brass holders were placed upon a table in the bedroom landing. As a rule, a few match-boxes were put beside them, but sometimes this was forgotten, while Mrs. Woodhouse economically insisted upon her household stores lasting their proper time. Williamson went upstairs first, and stopped on reaching the table.

"Matches run out here, too!" he said to Whitney, who was close behind. "Shall I light your candle?"

Whitney's hand moved towards his pocket, but he remembered in time.

"Thanks!" he answered carelessly. "Perhaps you had better light the lot."

Williamson took out the gun-metal box and struck a small pine match.

"I filled it up again," he remarked. "I always like to have matches handy in an old-fashioned house."

"It's a good plan," Whitney agreed, and went away with his candle.

Five minutes later he entered Andrew's room and found him standing by the window.

"Come in," he said. "I'm thinking about that Canadian boat."

"So I expected," Whitney answered meaningly. "But we'll take the other matter first. Seems to me they're connected."

"The match-box matter? I don't know whether it was a clever trick or not, but I'd like to hear your views."

"Well," said Whitney, "I'll own I'm not so smart as I thought. Elsie soon tripped me up."

Andrew frowned. "Then she saw you. She understands?"

"Something. I don't know how much, but I'm free to admit that she's cleverer than either of us. However, one thing's obvious; Williamson took care to have a box that would hold a good many matches and keep them dry. It's curious that he didn't shake it before he said it was empty. Anyhow, I reckon he overdid the thing, because if he had given me a thick wax match like those we found on board the wreck, it wouldn't have proved much, while his anxiety to show he used the small pine kind strikes me as significant."

"Elsie must be kept out of all this," Andrew said firmly.

"Then I guess you'll have to keep her out, if it's possible; I'm not up to Miss Woodhouse's mark. But I suppose you noticed Staffer's attempt to learn if you knew much about the North Channel."

"I did. We'll let that go for the present. The A. & P. boat was mined or torpedoed. What are we to do?"

Whitney looked hard at him. "To begin with, you must make up your mind how far you are willing to go. You're proud of being a Johnstone, and put the good name of the family pretty high?"

"Yes," said Andrew slowly, "that is true. These, however, are personal reasons, and don't come first. You can take it for granted that I'm ready to go as far as is needful."

"Then we must try to find Rankine and tell him what we suspect."

"Very well," said Andrew. "We'll sail on the ebb in the morning."

Whitney made a sign of agreement and went away. Andrew had not hesitated about his decision, but Whitney knew it had cost him something.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CONFERENCE AT SEA.

NORTH Barrule's blunt cone and the range of Manx hills beyond it cut, harshly blue, against an angry blaze of saffron that had broken out when the rain stopped and was now beginning to fade. The sun had sunk behind the island, and the sky to the north-west was black as ink, but the tall cliffs of the Mull of Galloway were traced across the storm-cloud in a neutral-tinted smear. Between them and the *Rowan* stretched a belt of lead-coloured sea, which, in the foreground, rose in hollow-fronted walls with livid white summits that overweighted them until they curled and broke in cataracts of foam.

It was blowing hard, and threatened to blow harder soon, but Andrew's wet face was tranquil as he sat on the weather coaming, braced against the strain of the helm. Whitney was in the cockpit, where he could avoid the worst of the spray, but he was cold and sore from twenty-four hours of savage lurching. Clouds of spray drove across the boat, striking the canvas and blowing out to lee under the boom, but some fell short and beat upon Whitney's lowered head. The *Rowan*, beating to windward, progressed in jerks and plunges, nearly stopping with a shock now and then as her bows sank into a comber. Whitney thought she could not carry her shortened canvas long, but their port was to windward, and they could not ease her much if they wished to reach it.

"She's ramming them pretty badly," he remarked as a white sea boiled across the deck. "I suppose you'd find her hard to steer if I lowered the staysail?"

"Yes," said Andrew, "she makes my arms ache now. Still, if it doesn't blow much worse in the next two hours, we'll find smoother water to lee of the island." Then something on the horizon caught his eye and he added: "Get me the glasses."

Whitney went below to look for them, and lighted the cabin lamp. The floor and beams were steeply inclined, and he had to brace his feet against the centreboard trunk. The narrow cabin throbbed with a muffled uproar, and water trickled in. There was a pool that splashed about where the floor boards met the locker. The leather case of the glasses had swollen, and he spent a minute or two in opening it, though he made the best speed he could. They had been searching for Rankine's vessel in weather that had tried their nerve and skill. Once or twice it had looked as if they must run for shelter, but the breeze had moderated a trifle, and Andrew had held on. Now, however, he was making for Ramsey, to Whitney's keen satisfaction. Going up, he gave him the glasses, and Andrew wound the tiller-line round one hand as he put them to his eyes.

He saw what he had expected; two slender spars and a funnel, both sharply slanted, that rose above the back of a distant sea. Then a patch of dark hull swung into sight, and vanished again.

"The survey boat," he said, giving Whitney the glasses. "She must be near the edge of King William's bank, and we'll find an ugly sea running there. You had better start the pump."

It was hard work, for when Whitney unscrewed the plug on deck the sea poured down the pipe to meet the water he forced out, and the boat's wild plunges threw him against the coaming, but he persevered. Since they were likely to find the sea worse, she must be cleared of water before more came on board. It was

some time before the pump sucked and only froth came up, after which Whitney precariously balanced himself on the cabin-top with his hand upon the boom while he looked about.

Every now and then the straining storm-jib plunged into a sea that curled in foam across the bows, throwing showers of spray into the hollow of the staysail. Then the bowsprit swung high above the turmoil and the water blew away in streams from the canvas while a frothy cataract poured aft down the uplifted deck. When he glanced to windward the spray lashed his face, but he distinguished a rolling steamer some distance off. There was no smoke about her funnel, and after watching her for a few moments he did not think she moved.

"Lying head to sea," he remarked. "Rankine might as well run into harbour; he won't do much sounding to-night."

"That's plain. It doesn't look as if he thought sounding his most important job. However, you might haul the staysail down."

Whitney scrambled forward, and when he let go the halyard, dropped on hands and knees. The straining sail would not run down the wire it was fastened to, and he must cross the narrow deck to free it. He did not want to go, because the *Rowan* buried her bows as she plunged, and the foam boiled over them a foot in depth, but the whitening of the sea to windward showed that a savage squall was on its way. He reached the inboard end of the bowsprit and held fast while a comber washed across the rail, and then, rising half upright, seized the line that hung from the head of the sail. The loosened canvas thrashed him, he was swung to and fro, in danger of going overboard, but he held on until the sail came down with a run and he fell on to his knees.

The plunges were not quite so vicious when he got back to the cockpit, but the alteration in the sail-

spread made steering difficult, and Andrew strained against the pull of the tiller-line as he drove her through the squall. In the meantime, they had drawn up on the steamer, which now lay close ahead, rolling until her deck sloped like a roof, and then lurching back with her streaming side lifted high above the sea. Andrew went about and then ran close to leeward, where they checked the *Rowan* by hauling her jib aback. A man in oilskins leaned out from the steamer's bridge, and the fading light touched his wet face.

"Rankine," said Andrew. "We must try to make him hear."

Next moment, a shout came down across the broken seas that rolled between the vessels. "Yacht, ahoy! What d'you want?"

"To see you," Andrew answered, throwing his voice to windward with all his force. "It's important."

Rankine steadied himself against the rail, with his glasses at his eyes.

"The *Rowan*; Mr. Johnstone! Could you jump on board our gig?"

"Can't leave the boat," said Andrew, letting her forge ahead a few yards nearer.

Rankine made a sign of comprehension. "Very well. Follow us into shelter."

Andrew waved his arm, and trimming the jib over, drove the *Rowan* ahead. As he did so, the steamer's screw splashed round half out of water, and she slowly turned towards the north.

"That's not the way to Ramsey," Whitney grumbled.

"No," said Andrew. "I expect he has some reason for not going there, and means to run in behind the Mull, though it's farther off."

Whitney frowned as he glanced across the wild stretch of foaming water towards a twinkling stream of light. He was numbed and wet, and had frankly had enough, while it was now getting dark and the bitter wind seemed freshening to a gale, but since

Andrew meant to follow the steamer, there was nothing to be said. The only comfort was that their change of course brought the wind farther aft and the *Rowan* would sail fast.

Rankine's crew hung out a stern light as their vessel left the yacht, and Whitney, getting down in the cockpit, tried to dodge the spray while she rolled and tumbled across the high beam-sea. He was sorry for Andrew, who must sit on the coaming amidst the spray, though he imagined his comrade would be sufficiently occupied to make him careless of the wet and cold.

As a matter of fact, Andrew mechanically avoided the rush of the foaming combers, for he was thinking hard. He shrank from the meeting he had sought, because he knew he was badly equipped for the difficult part he must play. He suspected Williamson of practices which must, at any cost, be stopped, since it was unthinkable that a traitor should make use of Appleyard. This was bad, but it was worse that Staffer must know what his guest was about. Andrew could not imagine that Staffer had been deceived, and granting this, it followed that he was acting as Williamson's confederate.

The trouble was that if Andrew exposed the men, the innocent would suffer. Staffer was Mrs. Woodhouse's brother, and Andrew pitied the quiet woman. She had shown that she liked him, and made him feel that Appleyard was still his home. Then there was Elsie, whom Staffer had certainly treated well. She owed him much, and would be crushed by shame if she learned his share in the plot. Andrew knew her well enough to feel sure of this. Elsie was true as steel; if he told her his suspicions, she would urge him to do his duty. Still, she would suffer, and part of Staffer's punishment would fall on her. It would not be forgotten that she was the niece of a foreign spy, and her mother might be suspected of complicity.

It was a painful situation, because Andrew would gladly have made any personal sacrifice that might save the girl a pang. He must try to find a way of doing his duty without involving her, and determine how he could warn Rankine and yet keep back part of what he knew. This was a repugnant course that he had no ability for, and he frowned as he drove the dripping boat across the foaming sea.

At times the steamer's stern light almost faded out, but it grew brighter again, and he knew that Rankine was waiting for him. It was now blowing hard, and the combers looked very steep and angry, though he could no longer distinguish them until they broke close to the yacht. He imagined that they were stirred up by a strong tide, and several pinnacles of rock rose from deep water in the neighbourhood. He hoped Rankine knew their position as he followed the steamer's light.

At length the sea got smoother, and, instead of breaking, ran in a long, disturbed swell. The wind no longer hove the boat down with a steady pressure, but lightened until she swung nearly upright and then fell upon her in furious squalls that sent her staggering along with her lee deck deep in the foam. A lofty black ridge towered above her port side, and Andrew knew they were behind the Mull of Galloway. The water, however, was too deep and the tide too strong for them to bring up there, and he supposed Rankine knew of a safe anchorage.

After a time he heard a whistle, and the light ahead stopped ; then there was a roar of running chain, and as he luffed up a shout reached him.

“Let go and give her plenty scope !”

The chain was nearly all out before Andrew thought she had enough, and while she rolled and tumbled on the swell a splash of oars came out of the dark. Then a white gig loomed up alongside, and he and Whitney jumped on board as the crew backed away. They had to wait a minute or two close to the steamer's

side, until a smooth undulation lapped the lurching hull, when they seized the ladder and scrambled up.

Rankine took them into a small, teak-panelled room with a brass stove in a corner. It was remarkably neat, though a cushioned locker, a small table, and two camp-chairs comprised the furniture. Nautical instruments occupied a rack, and a large chart of the Irish Sea was spread upon the table. Rankine put a bottle of wine and some cigarettes upon the chart, and then hung up his wet oilskins.

"We're safe here so long as the wind keeps to the west, and I can give you a berth if your cabin's wet," he said.

"No, thanks," said Andrew. "It's an exposed coast."

He tasted the wine Rankine poured out and lighted a cigarette. Whitney said nothing, and there was silence for a time. Rankine waited, with a polite smile.

"What were you doing near King William's Bank?" Andrew asked presently, and the others knew his question was more to the purpose than appeared.

"Taking bearings and sounding, until the sea got up. I've made one or two interesting discoveries about that shoal."

Although he sympathised with Andrew, Whitney felt amused, because he saw that Rankine would do nothing to help him.

"You gave us a long run," Andrew resumed. "We would have got better shelter in Ramsey Bay."

"That's true. I preferred this place."

Andrew frowned at the chart, as if he did not know how to go on, and Whitney came to his rescue.

"I guess it suits you better to keep away from port; you don't want to be seen and talked about."

Rankine smiled. "Am I mistaken in suggesting that we don't make much progress. Now, after meeting you at Craigwhinnie and inviting you to come on board, it's a satisfaction to find you have taken me at my word; but if you have any other reason for the visit, I'm at your command. I understood this was so."

"The matter is important, and we want to feel we're justified in talking about it," Whitney replied. "In fact, if your work's confined to surveying, we'd sooner you regarded us as casual guests."

"Then I think you can take it that my job doesn't end there. I'm still a naval officer, though I'm now assisting the Trinity House."

Whitney laughed. "Well, I guess that's as much as one could expect you to allow. British official caution is a remarkable thing." He turned to Andrew. "You can tell him what we've seen."

Andrew began with their adventures on the sands when the lamp went out, and then mentioned the signal lights on Barennan Crag and what they had discovered on board the wreck. He told the story well, adding particulars that had escaped Whitney's observation, and Rankine followed him closely on the chart. By and by Andrew asked: "Am I obscuring the thing by too much detail?"

"No," said Rankine. "Tell it in your own way; I find it all interesting."

He looked up with frank appreciation when Andrew had finished. "I don't think I've heard as clear and concise a report before. May I suggest that you're rather wasting your talents? You ought to be in the navy."

"I had to leave the army," Andrew replied, colouring. "But that's not what we have to talk about."

"No," agreed Rankine, who lighted his pipe and was silent for a time.

Whitney watched him with tranquil interest. The teak-panelled room was warm and bright, and after long exposure to numbing cold it was soothing to feel himself getting warm and drowsy, though the men still held his attention. The naval officer was, no doubt, the cleverer of the two, but Whitney thought he recognised a strong similarity in their characters. They were resolute, quiet, and capable, and he felt sure of their honesty. Rankine's face was now gravely

thoughtful, but Andrew's wore a troubled frown, and Whitney imagined he recognised that the difficult part of the interview had not been reached yet.

By and by Rankine knocked out his pipe. "What you have discovered seems to have one of two meanings. It may indicate a signalling of military and political news, which, strictly speaking, is not my business; or it may have some bearing on the loss of the A. & P. liner, and perhaps lead to similar attacks."

"Which would be your business," Whitney suggested.

"I can't talk about that, but Mr. Johnstone did right in telling me," Rankine answered, and turned to Andrew. "Have you told anybody else?"

"No," said Andrew, with a curious quietness that showed Whitney he had decided on his course.

"Why not? If my first surmise is correct, it's a matter for the military authorities."

"It seems to me the thing's not ripe. I have nothing but vague suspicions to go upon."

"Then you suspect somebody?"

"Yes," said Andrew.

Rankine looked at him in silence for a few moments, and then remarked: "I suppose you mean to follow up the clue you've got."

"You can take that for granted."

"And if you find your suspicions right?"

"When I'm certain of that, I'll act, but not before."

"Well, you, no doubt, recognise the responsibility you're taking. There are people appointed to investigate these things who could act with greater skill and force."

"I see that," said Andrew quietly. "When I think the time has come, I'll go to them, or you."

"But you mean to decide whether it has come or not?"

"Exactly," said Andrew. "I must decide."

Rankine looked hard at him, knitting his brows, before he said, "I cannot tell you what my orders are, but you put me in an awkward position. I may do wrong in not reporting our conversation."

"Even if you did report it, I should stick to the line I've taken," Andrew replied, with a dry smile. "If this led to my arrest, it would, of course, prevent my watching the coast. I can do that as well as you."

"Better; you wouldn't be suspected," Rankine said shortly. "However, as I see you must be indulged, I'll tell you how to find me when you have something more to say. You must be careful to follow my instructions."

"Then write them down."

"I think not; I'm rather straining my authority in giving them to you at all, and secrecy is important."

Whitney got up. "Perhaps I ought to remind you that I'm not a British subject."

Rankine regarded him with a gleam of amusement. "Since you are in Mr. Johnstone's confidence, you can sit down again. He won't mind my saying that, so far as strictly nautical matters go, he's well qualified to deal with them, but there are touches about what he told me that seem to show he has had your help. Now you must exactly follow these directions——"

He told them how they could learn his movements and send him word. "I imagine that's all, and we'll talk about something else," he concluded. "If you think the weather permits it, I'd be glad to keep you on board."

Andrew opened the door, and the bitter draught that swept in lifted the chart on the table and swirled about the room. They heard the surf beat upon a rocky beach and the wind scream in the shrouds.

"No, thanks," he said. "It's not a night to leave the boat."

Rankine, who went out with them, gave an order. Half-seen men ran aft and dropped into the dark from the vessel's rail, and presently the gig lay tossing abreast of the gangway. Whitney looked at the warm, well-lighted deckhouse with regret, and then, buttoning his oilskins, followed Andrew, who jumped down into the boat.

CHAPTER XX.

WILLIAMSON GETS A SHOCK.

IT was getting late, and the rest of the household were in bed, when Staffer and Williamson sat in the library at Appleyard. Williamson had gone to his room with the others, but afterwards came down again quietly. He had arrived that evening, but had found it difficult to get any private conversation with his host without making his wish to do so rather marked. He imagined that Miss Woodhouse was watching him, and Whitney was constantly about. Now, however, he had said all he thought needful, and wondered why Staffer did not let him go.

The library was spacious and only lighted by a shaded lamp on a table near them. The polished floor gleamed like ice in the illuminated circle, but everything outside this was dim, and Staffer's face was in the shadow. The fire in the big hearth had sunk, and a pale-blue flame that gave no light played about the embers of the hardwood logs. The room was very quiet and getting cold.

"You'll be in town next week," Staffer said by and by. "Can you find a good excuse for taking Dick? A boxing or billiard match, for example."

"I don't know of anything of the kind."

"Then you surprise me. You belong to one or two smart sporting clubs."

"Sporting events are not exactly popular just now."

"There's always something going on, and if it's semi-private, so much the better. When one is as young as Dick, a little mystery is inciting, and it's flattering to feel oneself a privileged person."

"No doubt. For all that, I haven't heard of any attractive fixture, and if I invented one that didn't come off, it would make the game obvious, even to Dick."

"I suppose this means you don't want to take him," Staffer suggested. "Let's be frank."

"Then why are you anxious that he should go?"

"For one thing, it looks as if you had rather held Dick off lately, at which I'm a bit surprised, because it's against our plans. Then, if Dick's away, Andrew and his American friend will leave. I'd sooner not have them about."

"Your last reason's good; in fact, it's better than the other," Williamson said dryly. "I'm going to take no further part in exploiting the lad."

"It's a resolve that will cost you something," Staffer rejoined. "What led you to make it?"

"I imagine the thing is getting dangerous. We can't afford to run an unnecessary risk."

"That's true, but I don't see where the danger lies."

Williamson pondered. He had acted as Staffer's tool in leading Dick into extravagance, but Staffer had not been straight with him. Besides, if he now explained that Mackellar was suspicious, it would look as if he had turned against his confederate and tried to make terms with the bank agent.

"The lad has friends who would carefully investigate matters if he had to own his debts, and they might find out enough to cause us trouble. Then we're engaged in another business of first importance that can't be neglected while we make plans for our private benefit. If we fail, the consequences would be unpleasant."

Staffer laughed, and Williamson wished he could see his face, for his amusement had a hint of a threat.

"Remarkably unpleasant! As it happens, you haven't met with much success of late. Another man whom I needn't mention brought off the last big stroke."

"It was not my fault; things have been dead against me, as you know."

"So it seems! But our employers expect results, not excuses." Staffer paused and resumed: "As you have been unlucky, I thought you might find some advantage in helping me with Dick."

Williamson saw that the other's remarks were connected. He was being warned, and asked to think over his refusal, but he stood his ground.

"The advantage doesn't counterbalance the danger."

"Well," said Staffer, "I suppose that is for you to decide, and perhaps you are wise in concentrating on your particular business. Our employers are liberal when they're served well, but not as a rule indulgent when a post is unsatisfactorily filled."

Williamson was silent for a moment or two. Staffer was, in a sense, his superior officer, but he was, for all that, expected to use his judgment, and he foresaw danger for both if he meddled with Dick. Still, Staffer was powerful and had given him a significant hint.

"That's true," he agreed. "However, I don't think they have much to complain of, and we must try to work together as far as possible."

"Just so," Staffer answered, getting up, and they separated, apparently on good terms, though they were conscious of mutual distrust.

Next morning Whitney, who had been trying to get into range of a flock of curlew feeding among the sands, threw his gun upon his shoulder and set out for the *Rowan*. The sun was bright and the breeze fresh, and after opening the skylights to ventilate the boat, he went below to see if their blankets were damp. While he was busy he heard a foot on deck, and Marshall, the fisherman, came down the ladder. He visited the yacht now and then, and Whitney got out the whisky bottle.

"Help yourself, but you'll excuse my not joining you," he said. "It's rather early in the morning, and I reckon my nerves aren't as good as yours."

Marshall, who poured out a liberal portion, regarded him with a twinkle. "I'm thinking they canna' be bad since ye're shipmate with Mr. Andrew. He's no' the man I'd sail with if I was fleyt o' the sea."

"Well, I allow he is pretty daring, but he's cautious,

too, and knows exactly what he's doing. That makes a difference."

"Ay," agreed Marshall, "Andrew Johnstone's a by-ordinar' good seaman; but ye may run a risk ye canna' see. Tide-rips and sudden blows are bad, but they're no' the only dangers."

Whitney lighted a cigarette. It was plain that the old fellow had a warm liking for Andrew, and Whitney imagined he meant to give him a hint.

"I wish you'd tell me what you mean," he said. "You want to remember that I'm an American and not used to dark remarks. In fact, it's more or less my habit to say what I think."

"Ye'll find it expensive whiles," Marshall rejoined, with a chuckle. "Onyway, ye're a friend o' Mr. Johnstone's?"

"I believe so. It's a sure thing that I like him."

"Then he'll maybe need ye. It's no' an easy job he has. Yon two at Appleyard are kittle-cattle, and would be the better for watching."

"Why don't you tell me what they're after?"

"For yea thing, I dinna ken, but I'm certain it's naething good."

Whitney made a gesture of resignation. "This is a pretty hard country for a stranger to get along in. You're such a blamed cautious people that nobody can guess what you think. Why don't you give my partner or Dick a hint, if you believe there's something wrong?"

"There's aye a rizzon," Marshall replied with a grin. "Mr. Andrew mightna' believe me, and Mr. Dick would let it oot to Staffer. It's no' wise to offend the gentry, mair particularly your landlord, when a salmon noo and then comes by accident into your flounder net or ye chance upon a hare sitting ower close in her form."

"But Dick would not be hard on you, and he'll be your landlord soon."

"That's no' what Mr. Staffer's thinking," said Marshall, meaningly.

Whitney gave him a steady glance, knitting his brows. "My partner will get Appleyard if Dick dies."

"Ay, that's supposed to be the way o' it, but Mr. Dick has debts that would have to be paid. Then Mr. Staffer's acting baillie for the estate, and it wouldna' suit him weel to see Mr. Andrew get it."

"You mean he's a dangerous man?"

"Ye should ken. I'm thinking ye're intelligent and ye're Mr. Andrew's friend."

"I suppose that's a compliment, and I must try to deserve it," Whitney replied, and Marshall, who took another drink, went away, leaving him in a thoughtful mood.

The old fellow's remarks were dark, but two points appeared; he thought Andrew was running a risk, and that Staffer might put some obstacle in the way of his inheriting Appleyard. It was difficult to see how Staffer could do so, even if he could take advantage of Dick's extravagance in such a way as to give him a claim on the estate; but suppose Andrew did not live to demand his rights? This was a possibility that must be faced in the ordinary course of things; but Whitney remembered that his comrade had been in grave danger when the grey car swerved in Moss-paul glen, and again when the light went out on Mersehead sands. That Dick shared the danger on both occasions might, of course, be coincidence, but it might have a very sinister meaning. Whitney felt disturbed about it, but decided that as his suspicions might be unfounded and the matter was delicate, he would not warn his friends, and must be satisfied with keeping a keen watch on Staffer. Then he picked up his gun and left the yacht.

One morning shortly after this, Williamson picked his way across the moss at the foot of Criffell as day was breaking. He was tired and hungry, but, even at

the risk of missing his breakfast, did not want to arrive at Dumfries too soon. Dawn was late now and he must not give the hotel people cause to wonder why he had set out long before it was light.

The black mass of the mountain rose between him and the east with a flush of pink above its sloping shoulder ; the rolling country to the west was shadowy, and dry tufts of wild cotton glimmered a ghostly white among the dark peat-hags. There had been light frost for a few days, but it had gone, and a raw wind blew in his face. The ground was getting soft, the rushes he brushed through were beaded with moisture, and now and then half-thawn ice crackled beneath his wet boots. Still, as he did not wish to loiter about Dumfries, he went on leisurely.

When he got over the fence, he found the loaming softer than he expected, and on reaching the cothouse decided that it would not be safe to ride the motor-bicycle. The machine, however, was light, and he was glad of a chance to warm himself by pushing it to the main road. There was nobody in the wet fields, but the light was getting clear, and a thin streak of smoke rose from the farm among the trees. Everything looked grey and cold and desolate, but as he splashed into a pool a jolt of the bicycle warned him that he had better fix his attention on the ruts.

While he did so, he noticed a sinuous line running to meet him, and at first supposed it was the track he had made in going down the lane ; then he thought it looked rather deep, and with sudden suspicion placed the back wheel of his bicycle beside it. The pattern the tyre left in the mud was different, and on looking about he saw another line run out from the grass. This seemed to indicate the track of a side-car, and Williamson, leaning his bicycle against the wall, followed the marks back over the ground he had traversed.

They led him to a gap in the dyke, and after taking down the pole that closed it, he traced them to a

peat-stack. They were lighter here, which showed that the men had dismounted, but he knew it would take some trouble to push a heavy bicycle with a car attached over the soft ground. This, however, had been done, and the machine dragged close behind the stack. After examining the ground carefully, Williamson returned to the loaning and made his way to the high road as fast as possible. It was now important that nobody should see him coming from the moss.

Reaching the road, where he would excite no curiosity, he sat down in the shelter of a bank and lighted a cigarette, for he had got a shock. Somebody had driven a motor-bicycle down the loaning not long ago, but had not gone to the farm. This was strange, and it was significant that the man had taken a good deal of trouble to hide the machine, which suggested that he must have meant to leave it for some time, and wished to prevent its being seen. There was nothing on the moss to repay a visit, and the owner of a motor-bicycle would have no reason for taking a short cut across the mountain on foot, when he could drive round as soon by road. That there was probably another man in the side-car made the puzzle worse, but Williamson's face hardened as he admitted the possibility of their having tried to follow him.

Looking back at the rugged fellside anxiously, he saw that as he crossed its summit he would have been visible against the sky, though anybody coming up could not be seen against the dark heath. It was unfortunate he had not looked back as he went down the other side, or hidden behind a boulder and waited, but he had no ground for believing that anybody knew about his journeys across the hill.

He was engaged in a dangerous business, and the consequences would be serious if the military authorities found him out ; but this was not the worst he feared, since they might be baffled. Staffer had hinted that his employers were not satisfied, and it was a dangerous

thing to disappoint them. Their rewards were liberal, but their servants must perform their task. Williamson shivered as he remembered what he had heard about the fate of one or two who had not succeeded in this, and that he knew enough of his masters' plans to make them uneasy if they doubted him.

Cowering behind the bank while the cold wind whistled past, he carefully thought out the situation, and saw that he had to face one of two dangers. He had by some carelessness excited suspicion and was being watched; or he was disturbed by his friends. In the latter case, flight to America was the only means of escape, because if the people to whom he was no longer useful failed in one plan to put him out of the way, they would try another. He would certainly not be left free to save himself by telling what he knew. But if he had only the British authorities to fear, there was less cause for alarm. They could be thrown off the track; indeed, this must be done, since to abandon the work he had undertaken for fear of arrest would be a dangerous admission of incompetence.

Williamson was getting very cold, and a searching drizzle had begun to fall, but he scarcely noticed it as he sat weighing the arguments for and against each supposition. Eventually, he decided that he must blame some incautiousness of his own, and began to wonder whose suspicions he had aroused. Whitney had a motor-bicycle, and its tyres would leave such a mark as he had noticed, but this did not prove much, because the make was in common use. The American was shrewd and a friend of Andrew's, but while both were antagonistic Williamson thought they only opposed him on Dick's account. Well, he had promised to leave Dick alone, which ought to satisfy them, and if he was very careful he would, no doubt, be able to elude any other enemies. Then he decided to say nothing to Staffer, whom he distrusted. Soon afterwards, he started the bicycle and set off for Dumfries.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE WHAMMEL BOAT.

THIN fog drifted down the Firth when, with Whitney's help, Andrew pulled the dinghy up the bank and then stopped to look about. It was nine o'clock in the evening when they left the *Rowan* at anchor in the channel a hundred yards away, and he knew the tide was beginning to flow, which meant that he had an hour and a half in which to reach and return from the wreck. Everything was obscured to the east, but to the west the sky was clear, and a thin, bright moon shone in a patch of dusky blue. The sand felt harder than usual, for the night was frosty, but the melancholy calling of wild fowl told that the salt ooze in the gutters was still unfrozen. There was no other sound except the ripple of the current across the shoals.

"I suppose we'll let up for a bit if we see nobody to-night," Whitney suggested.

"Yes," said Andrew; "the tide's getting late."

Whitney nodded agreement. They had sailed from the burnfoot three days ago, and after standing out to sea on the ebb, returned to the outer end of the channel in the dark as soon as they could stem the slackening stream. Then, landing in the dinghy, they hung about the wreck until the advancing tide drove them back. They had done so for two nights, without seeing anything suspicious, and could now abandon the search, because as the time of high-water approached six o'clock the tides did not run out far enough to enable anybody to reach the wreck from land.

Striking across the flats, they stopped on the edge of a hollow running through the highest part. The mist was driving nearer before a cold wind, and the moon was dim, but they could see for some distance towards the west across the level stretch of sand. Nothing

broke its smooth expanse, but the sound of the sea had grown louder and the wild fowl noisier.

After a few moments, Andrew struck into the hollow and began to follow it up. The sand was softer here, though there were spears of ice on the muddy pools, but the men's figures no longer cut against the sky, and Whitney, who left their course to Andrew, knew the need for caution. The gutter got deeper as they went on, until they could not see beyond its banks, and by and by began to wind off to one side. When Andrew stopped at the turning, a wild cry that was like a hoarse laugh came out of the dark.

"What's that?" Whitney asked.

"A black-backed gull," said Andrew thoughtfully. "They're suspicious brutes and a nuisance when you're trying to crawl up to a flock of duck. In fact, it often looks as if they laughed because you'd lost your shot."

"Do you think something has disturbed the bird?"

"We'll know in a minute."

A mournful wail that ended in a quavering tremolo fell from the air as the harsh laughter died away, and Andrew said, "That's a curlew going over."

Then a shrill screaming broke out, and turning towards the bank, he began to climb out of the hollow.

"Oyster-catchers now; they're all off," he said.

When they reached the level, Whitney looked quickly round. The haze was crawling close up in long, low-lying belts, but it had not reached them yet, and as his eyes turned seawards he saw a black triangle projecting above the edge of the flats.

"A lugsail, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yes," said Andrew, "a whammel boat." Then he seized Whitney's arm, and moving back a few steps dropped upon his knees and dragged his companion down. Whitney understood the reason when he saw a faint, dark figure on the bank some distance off.

"After all, it may be a fisherman," he said.

"It's possible, but I don't know what he's doing here, and we'll follow up the gutter until we're abreast of the wreck. The fog will come down thick before we reach her."

"I don't know that I'm fond of fog," Whitney replied. "However, if you reckon you can find the dinghy——"

Moving back into the bed of the channel, they went on as fast as possible, for although they were out of sight, the winding hollow lengthened the distance. It got darker as they splashed among the pools, and at length, when Andrew thought they had gone far enough and they climbed the bank, everything was hidden by drifting fog. Whitney was frankly uneasy. Andrew knew the sands well, but, for all that, it would not be difficult to lose their way, and they had purposely left no light on board the yacht. Still, it was unthinkable that they should turn back when the man they had been trying to mark down seemed almost in their hands and, banishing his misgivings, he plunged into the clammy mist.

The birds had gone ; nothing broke the silence, and there was nothing to be seen. Whitney imagined that Andrew was going straight, but this was not certain, and he recognised that the man they hoped to surprise might have turned back. Andrew went a few yards in front, a dim, ghostly figure in the fog, but it was a relief to see that he showed no hesitation. Though they tried to move quietly, they made some noise. Where the bank was hard their footsteps rang through the haze, now and then shells crunched beneath their boots, and there were spots where they splashed through half-frozen mud. After a time, Andrew waited for Whitney to come up, and the latter saw the blurred outline of the wreck.

"Go straight on and then wait until I creep up on the other side," Andrew whispered.

They separated, and Whitney braced himself for a struggle as he moved softly forward. The man

would, no doubt, be armed, but he must not get away until they learned who he was, and Whitney set his lips as he neared the wreck. Andrew's footsteps had died away, and there was something that daunted him in the look of the dark mass of timber, but he went on, and presently stopped at the edge of a pool beside the vessel. Since he did not think anybody had left her as he approached, the man must be on board, but he must wait until Andrew came up. There was no sound but the drip of water and the wail of the cold wind; it was eerie and depressing to stand there in the fog, but at length he heard a cautious step, and knew his comrade had reached the opposite side of the hulk.

"Go ahead," he said softly, and scrambled up with a feeling of relief that the waiting was over.

He heard Andrew's heavy boots rasp upon the planks, but he reached the forecastle hatch first, and his nerves tingled as he dropped through it in the dark. He came down safely, and did not hear the clatter of feet among the timbers he had expected. While he felt about, for fear an unseen enemy should seize him at a disadvantage, Andrew sprang down and the light of an electric torch flashed round the hold. It showed broken timbers, sand, and glistening pools, but that was all. They had wasted their efforts; nobody was there. Andrew moved about, holding up the torch, and then extinguished it as he came back to the spot beneath the hatch.

"Well," he said, "we're no further forward."

"Could the fellow have seen us and slipped away?"

"Not on my side," said Andrew. "The fog wasn't very thick, and I could see the wreck. I expect you kept a good look-out."

"I did," Whitney replied. "He might have seen us when we noticed him on the bank."

"It's possible, but not likely. We had only just left the gutter, and he was going the other way."

Andrew was silent for a minute, and then resumed :
“ It would help us if we knew whether one could carry a wireless apparatus across the sands. I don’t think the thing could be hidden on board.”

“ It might be buried outside in a watertight box. Shall we come and dig ? ”

“ I think not,” said Andrew. “ We’d be seen from the shore, and a good glass would show what we were doing. In the dark, we would, of course, be forced to use a lantern.”

“ That’s so,” Whitney agreed. “ I’ve been wondering about the whammel boat, but as there’s nothing doing here, I think we’ll get back.”

They reached the dinghy before the tide flowed round her, and shortly afterwards got on board the *Rowan*. The fog was thick and the wind blowing against them down the Firth, but Andrew decided to hoist no sail when they hove the anchor.

“ It’s early yet to find deep water, and I can steer her with an oar,” he said. “ We’ll let the tide take her up.”

He sounded now and then as the current carried her away, and Whitney wondered whether it would strand them on a thinly-covered bank. Andrew had no guide except the depth and the hoarse murmur the stream made as it rippled across the shoals. By and by, however, he began to scull vigorously.

“ Not much water ; I think we’re too near the middle sand,” he said.

Next minute the boat stopped with a jar and listed down on her side while the ripples splashed angrily against her planks. Whitney seized the boathook to push her off, but Andrew told him to put it down.

“ She’ll soon float, and the tide’s not running very fast.”

They sat in the cockpit to wait, and the noise the current made as it swirled round her died away. She was, however, not quite afloat, and Whitney, who was picking up the boathook, stood still when a flicker of

light shone through the fog. He raised his hand in warning to Andrew, and both saw the gleam go out.

Then a splashing sound grew louder, and a dim grey object drove towards them. Whitney knew it was a lugsail boat beating up the Firth, and saw that she would pass at a few yards' distance if she stood on. So far, he did not think they had been seen, for the *Rowan's* hull was low, and she had no sail set. While he waited in suspense he heard the splash of an oar as somebody sounded.

"No' quite a fathom. Doon helm, Jock," said a hoarse voice. There was a flutter of canvas, and the boat, swinging round, vanished on the other tack.

Whitney waited a minute, and then, as the yacht began to drift away, asked: "What are we going to do?"

"Anchor as soon as they're far enough off not to hear our chain."

He sculled the *Rowan* into the channel, and presently dropped the anchor. When she brought up, he went below and lighted the lamp.

"They didn't see us, but I won't want to follow them up the Firth," he remarked. "The boat can cross the flats before us, and when we landed they'd all have gone, but it might look suspicious if we came up soon afterwards. I think we'll wait for daylight."

Whitney put the kettle on the stove and lighted his pipe.

"Well," he said, "I guess it's puzzling, but there's certainly something going on, and it may be something that ought to be stopped at once. I expect you see that."

"Yes," said Andrew. "I mean to stop it."

Whitney nodded and thought for a few moments. "So far, we haven't scored much; it looks as if the opposition were pretty smart. The point you have to answer is this—suppose they do some serious damage before we find them out?"

“ You mean that in trying to keep the thing in my own hands I take a dangerous risk ? ” Andrew said, with a frown.

“ Yes ; I can’t tell you what you ought to do, but you have my sympathy. You’re awkwardly fixed.”

Andrew leaned back on the locker and grappled with a problem that had troubled him much of late. He was quietly proud of the Johnstones’ traditions ; and the honour of the family, which had long stood high, was threatened. It was painful to own that a traitor was making use of Appleyard, but, had there been no other obstacle, Andrew would not have hesitated about denouncing him. The trouble was that if he did so, Elsie must suffer with her guilty relative. To keep silent might enable the plotter to carry out designs which Andrew with his limited powers could not thwart, and his duty to the State was obvious.

Well, he did not want to shirk it, and was willing to bear any personal loss and even bring discredit upon Appleyard, but it did not seem his duty to involve the girl he loved in disgrace. Elsie had done no wrong, but she was Staffer’s niece, and that would be enough to condemn her. Besides, he might be mistaken, and it was unthinkable that he should expose friends who trusted him to suspicion until his last doubts had vanished. If Staffer were proved guilty, nobody would believe that Mrs. Woodhouse and Dick were free from blame. And yet Andrew saw that his country must not be left unprotected from the plots of its enemies.

He set his lips as he tried to balance contending claims, using arguments on both sides that had led him into a maze before, and was forced back upon the decision he had already made. Something must be risked, and in the meanwhile he would follow up his clues alone ; it would be time enough to warn the authorities when he had found out what was to be feared. His face was tense as he turned to Whitney.

"I think we'll have to work out this thing in our own way, but as the tides won't suit for the next few days, we'll take a run north along the Eskdale road."

"Very well, if you reckon that's somehow in the plot," Whitney agreed. "It's possible you're right about the other matter. You'd put the load on the proper shoulders if you warned your authorities, but if they didn't get to work very quietly, they'd scare the fellows off before they found out much. The trail's certainly not plain, but I guess we can follow it without showing what we're getting after."

"You mean to be consoling, but I don't claim to be smarter than people trained for such jobs."

"Anyhow, you're independent," Whitney replied. "The official foot's pretty heavy, and stirs up a lot of dust, and it's easy to spot a patrol-man even when he wears rubber boots. You, however, don't need to make-up; you have only to be yourself, and nobody will suspect you. That's the truth, though I don't know if it's a compliment."

"See if the anchor's holding," said Andrew. "I'm going to lie down."

He lowered his folding cot, but the flood tide had covered the flats, and the yacht was rolling gently on the swell it brought in, before he went to sleep.

Farther up the narrowing Firth the wind was faint, and Elsie, lying awake towards high-water, heard the murmur of the sea. It throbbed in a deep monotone through the stillness that brooded over the fog-wrapped countryside. Elsie listened to it for a time, wondering what Andrew was doing as she glanced at the obscurity outside her window, for the Firth was dangerous to navigate in thick weather. He had promised to return next day, and she wanted him back at Appleyard. Somehow she felt safe when Andrew was about. He was not clever, but he was practical, and one could trust him to do the right thing in a difficulty.

Elsie was glad to remember this, because she had

difficulties to contend with. Dick had been restless and depressed, and his occasional efforts at rather boisterous gaiety had emphasized his general moodiness. He was obviously not well, but Elsie thought this did not account for everything. Then her mother had been quieter than usual, and her manner seemed to indicate secret anxiety. Elsie could not force her confidence, which disturbed her, because she liked to bear other people's troubles when she could not put them right, as she was often able to do. This was not a pose, because she was moved by genuine sympathy, and had, without conscious intention, made her influence felt at Appleyard.

Now she felt that things were going very wrong there. Something mysterious and sinister threatened the household, but she could not combat the danger, because she did not know what it was. Even now, when everybody was, no doubt, asleep, she had an instinctive feeling that there was mischief on foot, and although she told herself that she was highly strung and imaginative, her uneasiness would not be banished. Anyway, she could not sleep, and seeing that the fire had not quite gone out, she got up, and putting on some clothes, lighted a small reading lamp. Then, after drawing a thick curtain across the window, she opened a book, but found her thoughts would dwell on Andrew, who was out in the fog.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE LOST PAPER.

AFTER a time, Elsie closed the book with a gesture of impatience. It had not made her sleepy, and the room was getting cold, but she did not want to go back to bed and lie awake. Sitting still, she mused and listened. The wind always moaned round Appleyard, and when the nights were still one

heard the hoarse murmur of the Solway tide. Then it was subject to the mysterious sounds that occur in old houses ; floors creaked, boards cracked, and now and then a door would rattle. Elsie was used to these noises, but for no obvious reason her senses were alert, and by and by she sharply sat upright. She thought she heard a door downstairs being opened.

For all that, the sound did not startle her, because she had had a curious feeling that something unusual was going to happen, and with a quick glance at the window she decided not to put out the light. The thick curtain would probably hide it, and if not, to suddenly darken the window would show that somebody was watching. Then it struck her that she had not heard a key being turned or a bolt drawn, but the door fastenings were carefully oiled. Staffer had had this seen to, after being forced to wait some time outside one night when his latchkey stuck.

Elsie was curious and highly strung, but not alarmed. There were no burglars in Annandale, and, prompted by the suspicions that had filled her mind lately, she determined to find out who had come in. Putting on a few more clothes, but not her slippers, she pulled her door to softly and walked to the top of the stairs. The cold draught that came up from the hall showed that the door was open, and she stopped when she had gone down a few steps. So far, she had not paused to reflect, but she recognized now that she had not altogether acted on an unreasoning impulse. Dick and Staffer were at home, but she did not wish to warn the latter, and felt it might be better if Dick did not go down.

By and by she heard a low voice in the darkness, and felt a strange, disturbing thrill. She could catch no words, but the accent reminded her of Munich. Then a beam of light flickered about the hall, and she stood tensely still, with her heart beating fast, as it ran up the wall. Somebody was using an electric torch,

several of which were kept in the house in winter, and it looked as if the man had known where to find it. Elsie began to feel that she was in danger, but the light stopped and streamed back again, leaving her in the shadow. After that it flashed round and fell upon two men near the door. They had made no noise, and there was something startling in the way their figures sprang out of the gloom, until it struck her that they must be wearing goloshes or rubber sea-boots, and their dress suggested the latter.

One was Williamson, who had a rough pilot coat ; the other a stranger in an oilskin cap and jacket, although he did not look like a fisherman. He had blue eyes and a stiff, red moustache, but he vanished as the light travelled past him. Then it rested on the door of the library, which opened out of the hall, and though Elsie heard no sound she knew the men had gone in. What was more, she knew who carried the torch. This was the most disturbing thing, though it did not cause her much surprise, and she leaned upon the banister while she tried to think.

She had frankly distrusted Williamson, feeling that he threatened Dick, and knew now that she had never really trusted Staffer. He had treated her well, but she imagined this was for her mother's sake, and instead of affection she felt a curious, half-instinctive antagonism for him. After all, she had really not been his guest, but Dick's ; Appleyard, which she had come to love, belonged to the Johnstones and not to her uncle. She felt that its peace was threatened, and she must find out what the men were doing.

Moving noiselessly, she went down to the hall, and as she reached it a faint but steady light streamed out of the library door. This was not the torch ; somebody had lighted one of the lamps. For a few moments she stopped and hesitated, trying to master her fears, for she saw she must not be found out, though it was not Williamson but her uncle she dreaded most. This,

however, was not all her trouble ; the stranger's accent had awakened a flood of disturbing memories. She had been kindly treated in Munich, where she had learned her mother's native tongue, and the sound of it had stirred strong, deep-rooted feelings. The man with the red moustache had a look of command, in spite of his rough clothes. She knew the stamp, for she had seen it on officers whose wives had, for a time, been her friends. Some were men she had admired, but now they were her country's enemies.

That was the trouble ; one could not belong to two nations, and she was Scotch. Appleyard was her home, and Dick and Andrew, although not her kin, were dearer than anybody except her mother ; yet her mother's blood was in her veins, and she felt it stirring now. But this must not be allowed. She was her father's daughter, too, and belonged by adoption to the Johnstones. She had accepted their traditions, and being a woman, must side with the men she loved ; she felt that they were hers.

Then, realizing that she must find a hiding-place from which she could see into the library, she felt her way to a tall, old clock that stood against the wall. Its oak case did not project far, but by standing straight behind it she would be in the gloom, and the hall door, which remained half open, would help to conceal her.

Leaning forward from the corner, she found her view commanded the end of the library table, at which Staffer sat beside a shaded lamp. There were some papers in front of him, and the other men bent over the table examining them. She could not see their faces, but their attitude indicated concentrated attention. For a few moments nobody spoke, and then the stranger with the red moustache said something she could not catch. Staffer's face, however, was visible, and she saw him frown.

"Yes," he said, "Rankine is an obstacle, but he doesn't interfere with my part of the business."

Elsie could not hear what followed, but Williamson and the stranger spoke in quiet, earnest tones that suggested that what they had to say was important. She was, however, accustomed to Staffer's voice, which made it easier to catch his remarks, and by and by he stopped the stranger with an impatient movement of his hand.

"No ; you must get into the habit of calling him Sanders."

The other's face was hidden, but Elsie thought his pose stiffened as if he resented Staffer's tone. This seemed to indicate that he was a man of rank, which something in his bearing had already hinted.

"Well," he said in English, speaking a trifle louder, "if he is watched, as he suspects, you may have some trouble in getting his instructions. To visit him in Edinburgh might lead——"

Elsie could not hear the rest, but Staffer answered with a smile, "We have a suitable messenger." He turned to Williamson. "Nobody would suspect Dick, and he'd be safe, because he'd have no idea of what he was doing. He's going up with me in the car to-morrow."

"I'm not sure——" Williamson began, but they had gradually ceased to lower their voices, and Staffer stopped him with a warning sign, after which he opened a paper that looked like a map.

For the next minute or two he spoke quietly, and the others seemed to listen with close attention, though Elsie could not hear a word. Then he gave the stranger the papers, and getting up, moved out of the ring of light. Elsie heard a clink of glass, and presently stood straight against the wall, because she knew the men were coming out.

Williamson entered the hall first, and as he pushed the door back the light touched the clock. Its tall case was shallow, and when Williamson turned partly round, Elsie's heart beat fast. He went on, however, and the

stranger followed, putting the papers Staffer had given him into a pocket under his oilskin coat. He wore thick woollen gloves, but perhaps his hands were cold, for an envelope dropped out at the bottom of the oilskin. It fell a foot or two from where Elsie stood, and she thought she could not escape discovery if he stooped to pick it up; but next moment the library went suddenly dark. The man passed on, and Staffer turned on the electric torch as he came out, but did not flash the light near the corner. He extinguished it when the others reached the house door, and Elsie stood very still with tingling nerves.

She had escaped, but the envelope lay on the floor, and she felt that Appleyard was threatened by some plot the men had made, in which Dick was to be involved. Both must be protected, and she must get the paper. Its loss would, no doubt, embarrass the conspirators, and would probably not be discovered for some time, but she must be quick. Their footsteps were almost noiseless, but she heard them go down the steps, and stooping swiftly, drew her hand across the floor. Finding the envelope, she thrust it inside her blouse, and went back to the stairs. When she reached the landing she stopped to listen. It was possible the stranger might feel if he had all the papers before he left.

No sound reached her, which seemed to indicate that he had gone, but she forgot that the others had moved silently, and a flash of light swept up the stairs and struck her face. She was dazzled and alarmed, but with an effort kept her self-control. It would be dangerous to be seen trying to steal away, but if she remained, looking down over the banisters, her presence might be accounted for.

“Who’s there?” she asked in a sharp voice.

For a moment or two the light rested on her face, and she was glad to remember that she would not be expected to look composed. Then Staffer laughed as

he turned the beam on Williamson, who stood at the door.

"Our friend and I," he answered. "I'm sorry we startled you. Perhaps I'd better get a candle."

He looked cool, which was comforting, since it suggested that he did not know she had been in the hall; but she thought it wiser to wait, and saw him strike a match. Then he put out the torch and gave the lighted candle to Williamson.

"If you don't want supper, we may as well go upstairs. I expect the room you generally use is ready."

Elsie imagined that Williamson had not meant to stay, but he came up in front of Staffer, carrying the candle. She noted that he wore rubber knee-boots and that Staffer had only his stockings on his feet. When they reached the landing, Williamson looked rather hard at her, but his face was inscrutable. She could not be sure he had not seen her behind the clock, and Staffer's attitude might be intended to hide some plan for her embarrassment. But she must keep cool.

"Mr. Williamson can have the room," she said. "I think we could find him some cold meat if he is hungry."

"He'd sooner go to sleep," said Staffer. "I understand he meant to stay at Langholm, so as to get home early to-morrow, but you can never rely on a motor-bicycle." He turned to the other. "How far had you to walk when it broke down?"

"Four or five miles, after I'd spent some time trying to put it right," Williamson answered, and made his excuses for disturbing them; but Elsie thought he was taking Staffer's cue, and knew they were both watching her. For all that, she smiled as she replied with conventional politeness.

"Well," resumed Staffer, "it's getting cold, and I'll look after Williamson. If you hear a door open another time, you had better call me instead of going down." He paused a moment, and there was a slight

change in his tone. "We know your pluck, but I can't allow you to run a risk."

Elsie turned away with keen relief but feeling she had been given a hint, and on reaching her room locked the door before she took out the envelope. The name Thorkelsen was written across it, which suggested a Norwegian or Dane, and was not what she had expected, but she sat for a time with the envelope in her hand. She had no doubt it contained some dangerous secret which, on the whole, she shrank from learning, although her curiosity was strongly excited. A plausible excuse had been made for Williamson's visit, but she had noticed his clothes, and deck-boots and a pilot coat were not what one generally wore when motor-cycling. Then why had the man in oilskins come to Appleyard when he might have expected everybody to be asleep? It looked as if her uncle had a part, and perhaps a leading part, in a plot Williamson was engaged in; but she could not reason the matter out. Now the strain had gone, she felt limp, for she had got a shock.

By and by she roused herself and threw the envelope into the fire, which had not quite gone out. She could not betray her uncle, to whom she owed much, but he should not lead Dick into trouble, and Appleyard must not be used by her country's enemies. The situation, however, was embarrassing, and she could not ask Andrew's help. She longed to do so, because she instinctively turned to him when she was in a difficulty, and he had never failed her, but this was impossible now. She must wait and trust to finding some way of baffling the conspirators without staining the family honour.

At length she went to bed, and presently fell asleep, but got up rather early in the morning and found Dick outside, watching Watson clean the car.

"Are you going to Edinburgh to-day?" she asked, as they turned back to the house.

"Yes," said Dick. "A bit of a change is bracing, and though I'm fond of Appleyard, one can have too much of it."

"But Andrew and Whitney are coming back."

"I suppose that means you don't want me to go; can't trust me up in town?" Dick suggested, with a grin. "Well, I expect you see you're not flattering, although I must admit that I sometimes find a change of air, so to speak, goes to my head."

"I wish you would be serious, Dick."

"If I were, I might feel embarrassed. After all, you're not much more experienced than myself." He saw her grave expression, and changed his bantering tone.

"Never mind, you're a very good sort, my dear, and I'm not so ungrateful as you think. The trouble is that I must have excitement, and haven't much self-control."

"It isn't that," Elsie persisted. "I imagine they want to make some use of you."

Dick gave her a curious glance. "I suppose you mean Williamson does?"

"No," said Elsie, with a touch of colour in her face, "I mean both."

"Ah!" said Dick thoughtfully, "I hadn't quite expected this; but still——" He stopped for a moment, and then went on: "You're generally frank, Elsie, open as the sunshine, in fact, and I'm not clever at hiding what I think. Suppose you tell me what you really do mean?"

"I can't, Dick; but I want you to be careful in Edinburgh, for my sake."

"Very well. I'll promise that, and think I can manage not to let the others see I've had a hint. It's a funny thing, but although I am a bit of a fool, I really have more sense than people imagine."

Elsie was puzzled by his manner. The hardness in his tone was not like Dick, but she let the matter drop, and they were near the house when she asked: "Who is Rankine? Do you know him?"

"Yes ; he's a friend of Whitney's people, a naval officer. Struck me as a remarkably good type."

"Where is he now ?"

"I don't know. Somewhere between here and Ireland, surveying for charts."

"Perhaps Whitney will bring him to Appleyard when his ship's in port."

"I'll ask him to, if you like ; but I don't know you as a plotter. What's the scheme ?"

"I can't tell you," Elsie answered, with a careless smile. "It's a very dark mystery. You'll have to trust me, Dick."

"That's easy," he said in a different tone. "Anybody who knew you well would trust you with his life."

Elsie gave him a quick, affectionate glance, and they went into the house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

STAFFER'S MESSENGER.

DICK spent several exhilarating days in Edinburgh, although on the whole he conducted himself with a sobriety that rather surprised his companions, who were thus encouraged to leave him alone. Meeting two or three young students whose acquaintance he had casually made on the afternoon of his arrival, he accompanied them to the gallery of a theatre, where they interrupted the performance of a new problem play. This, however, was a tame affair, and when the quietest of the party had been rudely ejected without making much resistance, Dick, who merely got a gruff warning, felt disappointed with his companions. Later in the evening, an attempt to embarrass a Princes Street policeman miscarried because the big Highlander was sharper than he looked, and after one of the students had been rescued with

some difficulty in a rather damaged state, Dick went quietly back to the hotel.

Staffer and Williamson had not returned, and when a waiter told him they had left word that he need not wait up for them, Dick entered the smoking-room, where he was saved from what might have proved a bad relapse. A man sitting in the corner he chose made a remark about the weather, to which Dick replied, and presently looked up from his newspaper when the lad recklessly ordered a drink he knew it was dangerous to indulge in.

"Perhaps you won't mind my hinting that it goes better with plenty of potass," he said.

"Potass?" Dick rejoined. "This stuff has a distinctive flavour that you don't want to spoil."

"Well, perhaps not, just after dinner, but it's better mixed late at night. Try it and note the difference in the morning. That's the proper test."

"It is," Dick agreed, with feeling, and recalled the waiter, after which he gave the man a shrewd glance.

He had humorous eyes and a brown face, and looked like a small country laird or sporting farmer. Dick seldom resented a stranger's trying to talk to him, and soon found the man's conversation interesting. Moreover, he reflected that if the fellow meant to take advantage of his frankness, he would not have recommended the diluted drink, which Dick owned tasted better than he expected.

Their talk centred upon shooting, particularly of the rougher sort, and Dick found his companion knew something about the black geese, snipe, and shy wild fowl. Indeed, Dick only once found him wrong, though this was a rather strange mistake for a sportsman to make, and before they separated invited him to Appleyard. He thought the other, who had now given him his card, seemed amused at this, but he said he might come some day. Dick promised that Andrew would take him to shoot geese, and went on to talk

about his cousin while the other, who asked him a few questions, listened with interest. Then Dick went to bed, but although he saw the stranger once or twice again and the man gave him a friendly smile, he did not try to renew their acquaintance.

As they were getting breakfast on the morning they left Edinburgh, Staffer said to Dick, "We must start as soon as we can, but there's an adjustment to be made on the car that may keep me half an hour at the garage. I don't suppose you'll mind doing an errand for me in the meantime?"

"Certainly not," said Dick.

"Then you might go to the Caledonian Hotel and see a man called Sanders. I'll give you his room number, so you needn't bother them at the office. Go straight up in the lift and ask if he has any message for me; then you can come back to the garage, where we'll be waiting."

"He doesn't know me, but perhaps that won't matter?"

"I don't suppose so; the thing's not important," Staffer answered carelessly. "However, since you mention it, if he should hesitate, you can show him this."

He gave Dick a handsome silver cigarette-case, engraved with a rather unusual pattern round a crest, and the lad went out and turned down Princes Street. It was a fine morning with bright sunshine and a keen east wind, and Dick walked along carelessly, looking at the shops. At one he bought some gloves for Mrs. Woodhouse, and at another some delicate, quilled chrysanthemums caught his eye. He bought a larger bunch than he could conveniently hold, imagining that they might please Elsie, and farther on purchased an enamelled locket, for which he found he had not money enough to pay. The head of the department was a cautious Scot, who seldom trusted a stranger, but he parted with the locket, and by and by Dick met the man he had spoken to in the smoking-room.

A box of gloves stuck awkwardly out of his pocket, and a wrapped-up jewel case dangled by a loop from a finger of the hand with which he clutched the great bunch of chrysanthemums.

"It looks as if you had been shopping," the man remarked.

"I have," said Dick, indicating the flowers with a grin. "These things took my fancy, but as soon as I'd ordered them I remembered that we'd got as good at home. I didn't want to hurt the girl's feelings by asking her to take them back. She was a nice girl, and had gone to some trouble in tying them up. However, they'll show I meant well, and that's the main thing."

The other laughed as he said, "Then you're off this morning?"

Dick nodded. "It's as well I am. Though I haven't been here long, I've broken the bank. Come down and see me when you feel you'd like some shooting."

The other let him go, but turned away with a thoughtful look, for he was a judge of character, and knew Dick's gay carelessness was genuine. None of the pages and porters asked Dick what he wanted when he strode through the entrance hall of the hotel with his chrysanthemums. His twinkling smile and easy manner banished suspicion, and there were very few people who ever distrusted Dick. Staffer had chosen his messenger well.

Dick found Sanders reading a letter in his room, and thought the man had been surprised when he entered unannounced. The paper in his hand was crumpled, as if he had meant to put it out of sight, but he turned to Dick with a quiet movement. His face was expressionless, but his glance was very keen.

"Perhaps I ought to apologise for breaking in on you like this," he said.

"It's not quite usual," the other rejoined. "The general custom is to send in a card."

"Well, you see, I was told to go straight up, and as

I was thinking of something else, I'm afraid I forgot to knock."

"You didn't," said Sanders. "Who told you?"

"Staffer. I understand you have a message for him. We're just starting home."

"Ah!" said Sanders, and although his voice was quiet, Dick imagined that he felt some surprise. "You will excuse my remarking that, as a rule, one likes to know something about a messenger."

"Of course; I forgot," Dick agreed, taking out the cigarette-case. "Staffer is my step-father, and he said you'd know this."

"Then you're Mr. Johnstone of Appleyard?"

Dick nodded, and felt that he was being quietly studied. It was obvious that Sanders knew something about him.

"How long have you been in Edinburgh?" he asked, and looked thoughtful when Dick told him.

"Well," he resumed, "I have no message for Mr. Staffer. As a matter of fact, I was expecting some news from him, and have not received it. You might tell him so."

"I see; you can't reply to a message you didn't get. But I'll send him round when I reach the garage, if you like, and there's the telephone."

"You seem to understand the situation," Sanders answered, with a smile. "I won't trouble Mr. Staffer, as it is not important. Will you come down and smoke a cigarette?"

Dick said the others were waiting for him, and Sanders picked up the cigarette-case, which he had left upon the table.

"This is Mr. Staffer's, and perhaps you had better return it as soon as you see him. The thing is valuable."

Dick left the hotel, but took out the case and examined it as he walked back up Princes Street. It was heavily gilded inside, and he thought the engraving round the small gold crest remarkably good. The case

was beautifully made, and must have been expensive, but he suspected that this did not altogether account for Sanders warning him to take care of it. Dick's face grew thoughtful as he remembered the crumpled letter, which the man had not time to thrust into his pocket. Then it was strange that he had been unwilling to use the telephone, and, when one came to think of it, Staffer could have avoided some delay by ringing him up; it looked as if he had a reason for not doing so. Moreover, Elsie had told him that he might be made use of in Edinburgh.

As he remembered this Dick smiled. After all, he was not so simple as he looked, and people who misunderstood his character sometimes suffered for their mistake. His mind was occupied as he went on to the garage, where he found the car waiting at the door with Williamson inside. They had not brought Watson, and when Dick appeared Staffer started the engine.

"I suppose you saw Sanders," he said carelessly.

"Yes," said Dick. "Hope I haven't kept you; I wasn't with him long."

"Jump up," Staffer told him as he threw in the clutch and the big car rolled away down the street.

The traffic was thick when they crossed the railway bridge, and Staffer was forced to drive cautiously, while, when they ran between tall houses along the narrow highway out of the town, there seemed to be an unusual number of carts about and tramcars on the line. It was not until they were speeding past the last of the small villas on the outskirts that Staffer could relax his watchfulness, and then he did not speak to Dick, who sat behind and had not expected him to do so yet. Staffer and Sanders had given him to understand that the message was of no importance, and the former would accordingly show no haste to ask about it.

By and by they ran under a lofty railway viaduct and through a colliery village, after which the road led upwards across open country towards a high, blue

ridge that rose between them and the south. As the car sped on, the careful cultivation that marks the Lothian levels became less evident. There were fewer broad belts of stubble, and the dark-green turnip fields were left behind; no copses and patches of woodland lined the winding road. Rushy pastures rolled away from it, the hedgerows were made of ragged, wind-stunted thorns, and presently gave place to dry stone dykes. Round hilltops began to rise above the high tableland where the white bent-grass grew, and a keen wind from the North Sea stung their faces as they climbed the last ascent. Here Dick's eyes swept the landscape.

The Forth had dwindled to a thin, glittering streak; Edinburgh was hidden by a haze of smoke, and the Craigs and Arthur's Seat were fading into the background of the Highland hills. Ahead, across the divide, a long, gently-sloping hollow opened up where Gala water wound among the fields and woods. The road, however, ran straight along the hillside, which gradually rose above it, while the valley melted through deepening shades of grey into a gulf of blue shadow. As the car rushed down the incline a faint, white line was drawn across the distance, and Dick, who glanced at his watch, imagined it was an Edinburgh express.

Then Staffer, turning his head, asked: "By the way, what about the message Sanders gave you?"

"Oh!" said Dick, "he didn't give it me."

Staffer looked round as far as he was able, but durst not neglect his driving, and missed Dick's grin.

"But you saw him!" he exclaimed.

"I did, but he had nothing to say. He didn't know what you wanted, because he hadn't heard from you. Anyhow, that's what I understood."

The car had swung towards the edge of the road, and Staffer was occupied by the wheel for the next few moments, but Dick imagined that he and Williamson exchanged glances. By and by he looked round again.

"Can you remember his exact remarks?"

"I'm afraid not," said Dick. "Still, I think he expected you to send him something that hadn't come."

Staffer said nothing more, but Williamson put his hand in his pocket, and Dick imagined that he was taking out a North British time-table. A thin spire with a few white houses below it now stood out from the hillside two or three miles away, but Dick, who knew there was a station opposite the church, thought Williamson would not get out there. This would look significant after his hearing Dick's report, and he could get a train to Edinburgh farther on. Then Staffer said something that Dick could not hear, and the car raced through the village without slackening speed.

For a time the road ran southward beside the sparkling stream, and then wound round wide curves where woods rolled down the hollows of the hills, until, as they turned a corner, Galashiels factory chimneys rose about the waterside, and a haze of smoke floated across the valley. Staffer reduced speed as they ran in among the houses, and drove very slowly when they reached a sharp bend near the station, close to which stood a big, red hotel.

"I want some oil," he said. "We'll stop here and get a tin."

He pulled up in front of the hotel, and they went into the smoking-room, where Williamson walked to the fire.

"It's a cold day for driving, and I don't think I'll go any farther," he remarked. "I want a few things that I can buy in the town, and I'll go on by the afternoon train."

"As you like," said Staffer. "Your place is off our way."

Williamson left them soon afterwards, and Dick, who thought he had gone to the station, said to Staffer, "I wonder if you would lend me a pound or two?"

"I might take the risk, but why do you want it?"

"Well," said Dick apologetically, "it's difficult to

bring much money back when you go to Edinburgh, and if you don't mind, I'll stop here. If Andrew and Whitney aren't in the neighbourhood, I'll come on by train, but I expect to find them at Melrose or Abbotsford. You see, I felt rather shabby about leaving on the day they were coming home."

Staffer did not object, but Dick thought his compliance was accounted for by the whistle of a stopping train that was then starting for Edinburgh.

"Andrew has eccentric tastes, but allowing for that, it's hard to see what satisfaction he and his American friend can get from cruising about the Galloway coast in winter," he said by and by.

"They're fond of a shot at the black geese."

"They can get snipe and partridges at Appleyard without much trouble."

"They can," Dick agreed, smiling; "that partly accounts for it. If you knew Andrew as I do, you'd understand why he prefers the geese. Anything he can get easily, doesn't appeal to him. No doubt, it's a matter of temperament, but I imagine he goes punting after geese because it's a remarkably good way of getting cold and wet."

"Then it's only the shooting that takes him along the coast?"

"Of course. I can't think of anything else. Can you?"

"No," said Staffer, with a laugh. "But I'll admit I don't understand your cousin's type of character."

They left the hotel soon afterwards, but Dick's face grew thoughtful when Staffer drove off in the car. He had known for some time that Williamson derived an advantage from exploiting his extravagance, but had not minded this. Of late, however, Williamson had left him alone, but Dick did not think this was because Staffer had interfered on his behalf. He had admired and trusted his stepfather, who had always treated him indulgently, and retained some liking for him, though

he was beginning to know him better. He had vaguely realized that he was preparing future embarrassments for himself by getting into debt, but found comfort in the thought that the day of reckoning was some distance off; besides which, he had been warned that he might not live long. Then he began to see that he was, in a sense, wronging his cousin by incurring obligations that Andrew might have to meet. After all, Appleyard would not be his absolutely; it belonged to the Johnstone line and he could only hold it in trust for the next heir. He admitted that Andrew would make a much better laird.

Dick had courage, and calmly faced the probability of Andrew's succeeding him, though he had not always done so. He had once thought it his duty to marry as soon as he was old enough, and had chosen his future wife, but as he began to understand how weak he was, morally and physically, he had, with unusual determination, abandoned the idea. Elsie had inspired him with a quiet, respectful affection, but he could no longer think of himself as her husband. There was nobody like Elsie, but she deserved a better man. Because he loved her, she was not for him.

Leaving the town, he took the road to Abbotsford lost in gloomy thought, but presently braced himself to ponder the line he ought now to take. After all, he was the heir to Appleyard, and although he had recklessly ignored his responsibilities, he loved the old house. Now, all was not well there; something mysterious was going on. Dick held Williamson mainly accountable for this, but it looked as if Staffer had a part in the plot. This complicated things, because Staffer was his stepfather and Elsie's uncle, and Dick cherished the honour of the family.

Then he looked up as he heard the hoot of a motor horn, and his tense face relaxed into a smile. Andrew, in the side-car of Whitney's bicycle, waved his hand and Dick's troubles began to vanish. One could rely

on Andrew, who was a much better Johnstone than himself. Somehow, he would stand between them all and harm, though Dick could not tell him what he darkly suspected.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN EVENING AT APPELYARD.

RANKINE, who had got a few days' leave and was spending it at Appleyard, sat in a corner of the billiard-room, where the party had gathered after dinner. He had arrived during the afternoon, and Andrew was not altogether pleased to see him, although he liked the man. Elsie had suggested that Dick should invite him, and added that he might as well come when Madge Whitney was there. Since Elsie had not seen Rankine until he arrived, Andrew wondered what she meant, but admitted that she generally had a reason for what she did.

Nobody had been playing billiards or wanted to begin. Elsie and Mrs. Woodhouse were knitting and the rest talking quietly, while they waited for the evening newspaper. By and by, Madge Whitney looked at Rankine with a smile, after a remark of Staffer's about the navy.

"Don't you feel you must answer that?" she asked.

"I don't know that I can," Rankine replied, good-humouredly. "To some extent, Mr. Staffer's right. The navy certainly occupies the background of the stage, just now."

"It strikes me as being out of sight altogether," Staffer remarked.

"Well, perhaps that's its proper place, but I expect it will emerge from obscurity when it's wanted."

"We must hope so," said Staffer. "No doubt, your commanders are waiting for the right moment to make a dramatic entry on the scene; but one imagines

that ambitious young officers must find being kept in the background rather galling."

Andrew caught Whitney's glance and understood it as a warning not to speak. It had been blowing hard for the past week and he thought of the great battle-ships rolling until it was scarcely possible to keep a footing on their stripped decks, while anxious men slept beside the guns and bitter seas foamed across the ponderous, low-sided hulls. It would be worse on the swift destroyers, driving, half submerged, through the gale and trembling when the combers struck them, until their thin steel skin and beams racked and bent with the strain. No man could really keep a look-out in the blinding clouds of spray, and their decks would be swept from end to end with icy water. Rankine knew this, but he smiled tranquilly as he turned to Staffer.

"Oh, I don't think they mind, so long as they feel they're useful!"

"Is that what you feel?"

"Something of the kind. Surveying's not the work one would prefer, just now, but it's necessary. The banks and channels shift and our commerce must go on."

"There have been interruptions," Staffer said, dryly.

Andrew, who had noticed that Elsie was watching Rankine, felt puzzled. Staffer's manners were generally good, but while there was nothing offensive in his tone, he had gone rather farther than was altogether tactful. It looked as if he wanted to sting the young naval officer into an indignant protest, though Andrew could not see what he expected to gain. Rankine, however, agreed with him.

"That's so, and it's possible we may hear of another interruption or two. Our men will do their best, but while our cruisers are pretty active, they can't be everywhere at once."

Then the newspaper was brought in and Staffer gave

it to Dick. "You can read it to us if there's anything fresh. I can't see very well where I am."

Dick took the thin sheet. "Nothing of importance on the western front ; a trench or two carried, another lost." He stopped to fold back the sheet and then exclaimed : "But this is getting serious ! They've sunk another of our wheat ships in the North Channel. That makes three, you know, and it looks as if they'd nearly got a fourth."

"Read it," said one or two of the others, eagerly.

" ' A telegram from Londonderry reports that the British cargo steamer *Meridian* with grain from Canada was beached in a sinking state near Greencastle last night. Full particulars have not yet been received, but a violent shock was felt when the vessel was off Malin Head and soon afterwards she began to settle down. The water rose rapidly in two of her holds, but the bulkheads stood the strain and the captain was able to reach the mouth of Lough Foyle. Whether she struck a mine or was torpedoed is not at present known, but some light is thrown on the subject by the crew of the *Concord's* experience. The latter, a steamer of 6,000 tons, bound from Montreal to Glasgow, passed Tory Island yesterday, steering east. A high, confused sea was running, and it was getting dark when she was abreast of Portrush, where the look-out forward reported a submarine.

" ' The captain immediately altered his course, and the vessel, which was rolling wildly, listed over as she obeyed her helm. The look-out, who ran across the forecastle, after he hailed the bridge, as if to see the submarine better, was thrown down the ladder and picked up, unconscious, on the iron deck. Nobody else had seen anything suspicious, but the captain steamed out to sea and returned an hour or two afterwards nearer the Kintyre side. The injured seaman had not recovered consciousness when he was landed in the Clyde.' "

There was silence for a few moments when Dick put

down the newspaper. Andrew's face was hard, for Rankine had given him a meaning glance; Elsie was very quiet, but she was lightly flushed.

"I suppose it wouldn't be difficult to recognize a submarine?" she said, presently.

"No," said Rankine; "not if it was on the top, the superstructure would be seen. One might, however, mistake a spar or batten, floating upright, for a periscope."

Nobody followed up his explanation, but the party seemed to find the pause trying. Then Madge remarked: "They burn gasolene, don't they?"

"Either that or oil when they're running on the surface. The engines are driven by electricity when they're submerged."

"Can they carry much gasolene?" Elsie asked.

"Not very much," Rankine answered, guardedly.

Elsie was silent, but Madge resumed: "Can they carry enough to take them from Germany and back?"

"I believe some can do so, but they wouldn't have much to spare, and one understands that they'd run a serious risk if they remained any time as far away from their base as the North Channel."

"You must see that the point's important," said Elsie.

"Its importance is obvious," Rankine agreed.

"If the boat couldn't carry enough fuel, she'd have to get some on the way?"

There was another long pause and then Mrs. Woodhouse said, "You must mean somewhere in Scotland."

"Disagreeable conclusion, isn't it? But we don't know yet that it was a submarine," Rankine answered, and turned to Staffer, who was sitting back out of the clearest light. "It's some time since I played billiards, but I'll try a game of fifty."

"It would be hardly worth while to begin, because I'm expecting a visit from my business man, who's rather late already. But suppose there was an enemy

submarine in the North Channel that hadn't much fuel left, how could she renew her supply ? ”

Andrew glanced at Rankine, who had seemed unwilling to talk about the subject, but he smiled.

“ Oh ! ” he said, “ it's hard to tell. One could form plausible theories, but they'd probably be wrong. Perhaps we'd better leave the matter to the people whose business it is.”

Then he began to talk about something else and the curious tension that all had felt gradually slackened. Soon afterwards, a servant announced that Mackellar had arrived and Staffer went out, while Mrs. Woodhouse went to the drawing-room with Elsie, Madge, and Dick. Then Rankine moved up to the fire, by which Andrew and Whitney were sitting, and lighted his pipe.

“ Have you made any progress with your investigations ? ” he asked.

“ No,” said Andrew, quietly, “ nothing very marked.”

“ And you are still resolved to keep them in your own hands, after the news we got to-night ? ”

“ Do you know that the loss of the cargo boat has any connection with the matter ? ”

“ I don't, but it looks suspicious,” Rankine answered, with a touch of grimness. “ If I did know, my course would be clear.”

“ So would mine,” said Andrew. “ However, we found some matches and a candle on board the wreck, and followed a man across Criffell to the beach abreast of her, or rather we followed his tracks. Then we saw another fellow on the sands at night, but that's all I have to tell.”

“ Could you see either of the men clearly ? ”

“ No ; I didn't see the first at all, while the other was some distance off, and a thick fog was coming on.”

“ That means it was impossible for you to recognize him.”

“ Quite,” said Andrew, slowly. “ Besides, I didn't expect to recognize him ; there was nothing to indicate

it was anybody I'd ever met. We noticed a whammel boat, not far off, but nobody saw her come up the Firth."

"Then you made some inquiries about her?"

"Of course; we did what we could. But have you learned anything?"

Rankine smiled. "I've examined the wreck and dug up the sand, besides watching the flats for several nights. The place might be used for a wireless installation, but, lying in a hollow, with hills on both sides, it's not particularly suitable." He paused and looked at Andrew. "That had some influence with me."

Andrew thought Rankine meant that if he felt certain messages were sent from the wreck, he would have brought some pressure to bear on him.

"How did you get there?" he asked.

"We ran in behind the Ross island when it was too rough for surveying, and afterwards brought up near Abbey Head. You get some shelter there so long as the wind's not south."

"But it's a long way from Abbey Head to the wreck," Whitney interposed.

"I shipped a steam launch at Belfast."

"And went to the wreck and back at night? Wasn't it blowing hard?"

"Hard enough," said Rankine, smiling. "We had some trouble to keep the fire from being swamped, but she's a powerful boat and has a good big pump. Then we travelled most of the distance shortly before and after low water, when the sea was not so bad, but I'll own that I couldn't have found my way among the shoals except for Mr. Johnstone's directions. We made three trips and got back before daylight without noting anything suspicious."

The others looked at him in surprise. A steam launch voyage along that dangerous coast on a wild winter night was a bold undertaking, particularly when one must cross surf-swept sands with only a few feet of

water under the boat, but Rankine had safely accomplished it thrice.

“What about the digging?” Whitney asked. “Mightn’t it alarm our man?”

“The surf would level the sand in a tide,” Andrew said, and turned to Rankine. “What do you think of doing now?”

“I don’t know, but I’m afraid I can’t stay here as long as I expected. The steamer’s in Loch Ryan. We went in to make some repairs after a hammering we got. Now perhaps we had better join the rest.”

Andrew left them in the drawing-room and after a time found Mackellar alone in the library.

“I’ll have finished with these in a few minutes,” he remarked, indicating the papers before him. “Mr. Staffer’s accounts don’t give much trouble. He’s a man o’ parts.”

“Yes,” agreed Andrew, “the estate is managed well.”

“We must give him all the credit he deserves, but there’s another matter I’m anxious about. We have not got to the bottom o’ your cousin’s debts.”

Andrew frowned. “Do you mean that Williamson has got hold of him again?”

“I do not. I’m thinking he’s out of the game, and the borrowed money’s none o’ his. However, it seems that Dick has incurred some fresh liabilities. Here’s a statement; ye can study it.”

Andrew felt disturbed, but waited until Mackellar put the papers into his pocket-book.

“I can’t see how he has spent so much money; but how did he get it?”

“On notes that will mature when he’s twenty-one. I found the man who cashed them, but he parted with the paper since, and I cannot tell who holds it now.”

“I’ve no doubt you tried to find out.”

Mackellar’s eyes twinkled. “Ye may take that for granted. If there had been a weak spot in the man’s affairs, I’d have made him tell.”

There was silence for a minute. Andrew had vague suspicions, but did not think it was time to speak, and knew that Mackellar would take him into his confidence when he saw fit.

"The fellow who really made the loan has some courage," he said, presently.

"I'm thinking he kens the Johnstones' character. Dick would no' disown his debts on the ground that he was under age ; nor would ye, if your cousin died before he inherited."

"No," said Andrew. "Dick's debts must be met, but I would pay what he borrowed with reasonable interest, and nothing more."

"Ye're a true Johnstone," Mackellar remarked, with dry approval. "My opinion is that the lender's no' expecting ye to inherit."

"Well, it's most unlikely, and I'm glad it is so. I suppose you have nothing more to say, but you'll tell me when I can help."

"I will," said Mackellar, who went out.

Andrew did not feel inclined to join the others and strolled into the hall, where he found Elsie sitting in a corner with her knitting.

"I stole away to finish this belt," she said. "It's the last of a dozen I promised to let the committee have to-morrow."

"You keep your promises," Andrew replied. "It must be a comfort to feel you're useful, because somebody in the snow and mud will be glad of that warm belt. I begin to wish I'd been taught to knit."

Elsie gave him a gentle glance, for there was a hint of bitterness in his tone.

"It isn't your fault——"

"No," he said, recognizing the sympathy which had led her to break off, "it's my misfortune, but that doesn't make things much easier. Anyhow, although I don't seem of much use to anybody, I can stop grumbling."

“ You don’t often grumble. What is troubling you, to-night ? ”

“ It is rather hard to explain ; a general sense of futility, I think,” Andrew answered with a smile. “ Did you ever feel that you had come up against a dead wall that you could neither break through nor get over ? ”

“ Yes,” said Elsie, “ I know the feeling well. One sees much that ought to be done and finds it impossible. But what did you want to do ? ”

Andrew stood beside the hearth, silently watching her for a minute. Her face was quiet but faintly troubled, and although she was looking at the fire and not her knitting, the needles flashed steadily through the wool. Elsie had beautiful hands, but they were capable and strong, and it was not often she allowed her feelings to interfere with her work.

“ To tell what you meant to do and couldn’t sounds pretty weak, but I had two objects when I came home,” he said. “ I wanted to help Dick and keep him out of trouble, but the proper kind of help needs tact and I haven’t much. Besides, there’s something peculiarly elusive about Dick ; you think you have him, so to speak, in a corner, and next moment he slips away from you. Sometimes I suspect he’s a good deal cleverer than we imagine. But I won’t go on in this strain. We’re both fond of him, and he’s my cousin.”

Elsie nodded. “ Yes ; I know what you mean. You’re a very good friend of his and it wouldn’t be like you to give him up.”

“ I don’t mean to give him up, but just now, it looks as if I could get no farther. That’s the trouble.”

“ You mean part of it,” said Elsie, quietly. “ What was your other object ? ”

Andrew hesitated. “ It was rather vague, but I thought I might somehow be useful—to the country. I’m lame and can’t enlist, I can’t give much money, but I might, perhaps, help to watch the coast ; then there was the Eskdale road. You know my hobby.”

Elsie stopped knitting and gave him a steady look. "And after a time, you thought you saw a way to be of use. You found something out?"

"I did," he said, in a disturbed voice. "Still, it looked as if I couldn't go on with the thing. Some of the clues broke off and those I tried to follow led me into difficulties. You can't act on faint suspicion; it might lead to unnecessary complications."

"One must take a risk now and then," Elsie answered; "I mean, do one's duty and face the consequences."

Andrew did not reply and she resumed her knitting.

"Well, peace must come, by and by," she said. "Have you thought what you will do then?"

"Yes; if I could see Dick starting well as the owner of Appleyard, and, better still, safely married, I'd go away again."

"What do you mean by 'safely married'?"

"I think you know. He's such a good sort, and a girl who understood him and was patient with his failings would soon help him to get rid of them. She'd make the most of his good points, and Dick has talents——"

"Are there girls like that?"

"Yes," said Andrew, firmly, "I am quite sure of it."

Elsie gave him a curious glance. "But you're only thinking about Dick. What about yourself?"

"Oh!" he said, with a brave effort to be cheerful, "I don't count for much. I've no money and no particular ability beyond being able to sail a boat. Still, I've got the sea and I'm fond of wandering. It's a pretty good world, after all, and if you keep an open mind, you make friends wherever you go."

"But it must hurt to leave the old ones."

"Yes," he agreed, with a hint of strain, "it hurts very much, but, in a sense, you never leave them altogether. Things change of course, but you can come back if you are wanted."

He went away rather abruptly, and Elsie, who put down her work, sat still, with a curious, gentle smile. Andrew was true to the core ; he would never seek his own advantage when it conflicted with his loyalty to his friends. Now he was willing to sacrifice himself for Dick, though, perhaps, his poverty influenced him, too. Still, in some respects, he was dull ; he could not see——

Then Elsie resolutely picked up her knitting. She must not indulge in disturbing thoughts like these, and the belts must be finished. Shivering men, worn with stern fighting in Flanders, needed them.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BUOYED CHANNEL.

A BITTER east wind was blowing through light mist, though the moon was in the sky, when Andrew came out of a little shop in a lonely village near the Galloway coast. He carried a basket of provisions and wore a thick jersey and oilskins, but he shivered as he looked down the street. It was empty, and dark except for a faint yellow glow here and there in the windows of the small, white houses that rose abruptly from the rough pavement.

“ Dick’s a long time in getting the eggs,” he said to Whitney, who left the shop behind him with a loaf in his hand.

“ That’s so ; we’ve been most half an hour buying the few things you wanted. They’re deliberate people in this part of the country, but Dick understands them, and I expect he’s talking to somebody. Making friends with strangers is a way he has, particularly when he know’s we’re waiting.”

“ I could suggest another explanation,” Andrew replied. “ However, I hope I’m wrong.”

He looked round at a clatter of heavy boots and saw

two dark figures against a square of light. Then a door was shut and somebody said: "Here's yere mates."

Andrew waited until Dick, carrying a big paper bag, came up with a man who wore an oilskin cap and jersey.

"It's no' a good night," said the latter. "I wouldna' say but we might have a shift o' wind before long. They're telling me ye have brought up in the west bay."

"For the night," said Andrew. "It's an exposed place."

"It's a' that. If the wind comes from the south'ards, it will take good ground-tackle to hold ye."

"What about the burnfoot gutter?"

"It's snug enough, but ye might have to stop a week. Ye canna' beat oot when there's any sea running on the sands."

"Are there any geese about?"

"Weel," said the other, "I did see two or three bernicle, a week ago, but if it's shooting ye want, ye'll have to gang doon west. The geese have moved on, but I hear the duck are throng on the flats roon Deefoot, behind the Ross."

Andrew said nothing. He had picked up Dick at Kirkcudbright on the Dee, but had not seen a duck about the river mouth. It looked as if the man had learned that they came from the head of Solway, but did not know they were then returning from the west. He left them at the end of the village and Andrew asked Dick what had kept him.

"The eggs," Dick answered. "Jim insisted on them and I didn't want to disappoint him, though they're scarce just now. However, since I've got some, he'd better take them before they smash. I'm not clever at carrying eggs in a paper bag."

"Where did you get them?" Whitney asked as he took the bag.

"Where do you think?" Dick rejoined with a grin: "When you're in doubt in a Scotch clachan, it's safe to try the change-house."

"I suppose that's the saloon," said Whitney. "Well, I suspected something of the kind."

Leaving the road outside the village, they struck across some wet fields and came to a marsh, through which a muddy creek wound. After jumping deep drains and floundering through rushes, they reached a bank of gravel, past which the creek made its way to the sea. The bank was steep, and a mooring buoy floated in the channel, across which lay a waste of sand, dotted with shallow pools. This ran seawards until it was lost in the haze.

An old shooting punt that Andrew had repaired lay upon the gravel and they dragged her down. As she was larger than usual and the big gun had been unshipped for the voyage, she would carry them all, though her shallow hull was deep in the water and the yacht some distance off. They had brought their ordinary shoulder guns on the chance of getting a shot at geese or duck. The village was about a mile away, and the spot looked strangely desolate, although a raised causeway, lined by stunted thorns, that ran back into the mist, seemed to suggest that a road came down to the sands across the creek.

Andrew took the long paddle when they pushed off, and the tide carried them away between muddy banks down which rivulets of water flowed. In coming, soon after high water, they had crossed the sands, following the line of beach, but now they must head seaward until they could round the end of the projecting shoal. By and by the banks got lower and the riband of water widened, while presently, a tall upright branch rose out of it.

"That perch is new since I was here last," Andrew remarked. "Who was the fellow you were talking to, Dick?"

"I don't know. He told me he had a boat at the burnfoot, but the fishing wasn't good."

They drifted on until a strong ripple broke the

surface ahead. A small black object tossed in the disturbed patch.

"What's that?" asked Whitney. "Looks like a lobster trap."

"Lobsters prefer stones," said Andrew. "I don't think there are any here, but we'll see, if you get hold of the buoy. Anyhow, it will let me stop paddling and throw some water out."

He headed across the channel, and Whitney, crouching on deck, seized the ring of corks. The punt swung round sharply with her bow to the stream and there was an angry splash against her planks, while Whitney was glad to ease the strain on his arms by making fast the wet line.

"The tide's running strong," he remarked.

Andrew nodded. "The buoy's not on a lobster creel or we'd have pulled it up. I wonder what depth there is."

He pushed down the double-ended paddle, which, as used in shooting punts, is about nine feet long, and touched bottom when it was wet half-way up. Then he held the blade against the stream until the punt sheered across the channel, dragging the line with her, when he tried again. This time he could not find bottom.

"It looks as if the corks are meant to mark a corner of the bank," he said. "In a way, that's curious, because fishermen don't often bother about a buoy. They know the ground and are satisfied with sounding with an oar. However, we may as well bail her out."

Whitney and Dick sat on the after deck while he caught the water which ran towards them in the bailing can.

"What about the geese?" Whitney asked.

"The man mentioned bernicle and I'd expect to find them on the outer end of the flat, because it's soft ground and bernicle get their food in the mud. Besides, I'd like to see how this channel runs as the sands

dry ; there's more water than I thought. Suppose we leave the punt and walk down the edge ? As it's lower than the top of the bank, we'd be out of sight."

"I'll stay in the punt," said Dick. "I'm not fond of crawling through soft mud. Then, if you put up some birds, they'll probably fly over me."

They paddled ashore and left him with the punt, Andrew showing him two small rollers, which would help him to launch her if he wished to come after them. The sand was soft and made a sucking noise about their sea-boots, but this was the only sound except the faint ripple of the tide. The shore was hidden and there was nothing visible beyond the stretch of sloppy flat that vanished into the mist. The haze, however, was not thick, and faint moonlight filtered through.

"What do you expect to find here ? " Whitney asked, by and by.

"I don't know. I'm curious about the buoy and imagine that the fellow Dick was with wanted us to clear out. He was right in saying that we'd brought up in an exposed place ; but why did he tell us ducks were plentiful down west ? "

Whitney made a sign of agreement. "It's certainly suspicious."

They went on while the sand got softer, but saw nothing except a few small wading birds and a black-backed gull ; and then Andrew stopped near the outer end of the bank. Something black floated in the midst of a tide-ripple, about forty yards away.

"Another buoy but a bigger one, marking the fairway to the gut," he said, thoughtfully. "With that and the compass course to the corks we saw, I'd take a boat drawing eight feet up to the burnfoot at five hours' flood, on an average tide."

"Eight feet draught would give you a pretty big boat ; a vessel of about a hundred tons would float on that. But what would bring her here ? "

"That's the point," said Andrew. "I believe old

wooden schooners sometimes take cargoes of coal up these gutters and dump it into carts on the beach, but I'm not quite satisfied."

He turned suddenly, as he heard a flapping of canvas, and a few moments later, a tall dark shape emerged from the haze. At first, it had no clear outline, but Andrew knew it was the topsail of a cutter-rigged boat, beating in against the tide. She grew in distinctness until they could see her black hull washed by a streak of foam, and the straining mainsail, slanted away from them. The iron shoe of a trawl-beam projected between her shrouds, and the net hung in a dark festoon over her weather side. The wind was abeam just there and she passed them, sailing fast, but they waited, knowing that it would draw ahead where the channel curved. Presently, there was a banging of canvas that suddenly swung upright, and then filled and vanished on the other tack.

"Smart work!" Andrew remarked. "They'll have about twenty yards of deep water to gather way in before they bring her round again, against the stream. The fellows who can beat her round that bend don't need buoys. I'd like to take some bearings; this gutter's very sketchily indicated on the chart."

"Shore bearings wouldn't be of much use to anybody who wanted to come up in the dark."

"That's true," Andrew agreed, thoughtfully. "But we came for geese and may as well make our way back across the middle of the sand."

After a time, they found a nearly dry gutter, up which they moved cautiously until Andrew stopped. Out of the dark came a clear, high note, the clanging cry of the bernicle geese. It was answered from one side and behind, and then a measured fanning became audible. This swelled into a rhythmic creak as the broad wings beat the air, and the men crouched low, with tingling nerves, clenching their guns and straining for the first glimpse of the approaching birds.

"Flying low and right over," Andrew whispered. "Fire when you see the first."

Whitney got down on one knee, while the ooze soaked through his trousers and ran into his sea-boot, but this did not matter. It was worth sinking waist deep to hear the wild call break out close ahead. Then a dark object, planing downwards on extended wings, shot out of the mist; another came close behind, and the gun-butt jarred his shoulder while smoke blew into his eyes. He swung the gun as he pulled the second trigger, and saw a red flash leap out; and then the dark was filled with a harsh clamour and the furious beat of wings. Andrew jerked his gun open and the burnt cartridges shot out while smoke curled about the breach.

"Two, I think," he said. "Yours is up the bank."

Whitney found it presently; a small, black-breasted goose.

"My first bernicle!" he said, with a thrill of pride. "They're more like a big duck than the heavy lag birds we've already bagged. Do you think Dick will get a shot?"

"He ought to. They were flying straight up the bank."

They waited a few minutes, but no gunshot came out of the mist, and when everything was silent turned back down the gutter.

"The geese won't alight again," Andrew said. "As Dick knows that, I expect he'll launch the punt and come to meet us."

When they reached the edge of the water, Whitney stopped and lighted his pipe.

"It's pretty soft, farther on, and we may as well wait for the punt," he said.

He had nearly smoked his pipe out when they heard the splash of a paddle, and presently the punt crept out of the mist. Its low, grey-painted hull was hard to see, but Dick's form was more distinct and Andrew made an abrupt movement as he watched him. The

lad, who sat facing forward, on the after deck, lurched clumsily from side to side as he dipped the paddle. The punt was not going straight, but sheered about, and Dick did not seem to be making for the bank. This projected in a short cape, not far away, and then the sand ran back towards the east, leaving a stretch of rippling water that vanished in the haze. The tide was rapidly running seawards and the wind blew off the flat.

"Dip to leeward!" Andrew shouted. "Head her up for the point!"

Dick stopped and flourished his paddle.

"I'm not coming ashore," he answered. "Do you good to walk back. Jim's getting fat."

He appeared to chuckle over this and Whitney, who was spare of flesh, looked at Andrew. The latter made an impatient sign.

"Yes; he's drunk!"

It was plain to both that the situation was not free from danger. A shooting punt, the side of which is only from six to eight inches high, is essentially a smooth-water craft and is easily swamped, in spite of her deck. There was a good breeze, and if Dick passed the short point, he would risk being blown out to sea. The tide did not follow the sweep of bank but ran straight out.

"Don't be a fool!" Andrew shouted. "Run her in, at once!"

Dick sat hunched up, with the paddle on the deck, and they heard him laugh.

"It's quite oll ri'," he answered. "Needn't bother about me. I'm going to look for submariness."

Andrew ran towards the point, and Whitney, following, tore two buttons off his oilskin jacket as he tried to unfasten them with numbed fingers. He wore ordinary serge trousers and heavy sea-boots, but the punt must, if possible, be stopped before she drifted past the little cape. Afterwards, it would be too late.

Andrew reached the spot first, while the punt was

still up-stream of it, and at once plunged in, but Whitney, who had now got rid of his oilskin, stopped and tried to pull off his long, wet boots. He hardly thought Andrew could wade out far enough, and one of them might have to swim. He was furious with Dick, but the lad must be rescued. After getting his boots off, he went in up to his knees and then stopped again, because he would not be needed if his comrade could reach the punt. Andrew was waist deep but still floundering on, when Dick, who laughed hoarsely, threw something at him. It fell into the water, but the next shot was better aimed, for Whitney saw an egg smash on Andrew's oilskin cap.

Another struck him in the face, but the punt was now close by, and after a few more floundering strides, Andrew threw himself forward. The craft lurched as he fell across her deck, and Whitney thought she would capsize, but next moment, Andrew flung Dick into the well, and then, kneeling upon the deck, brought the craft ashore with a few strokes of the paddle. Whitney, who felt very cold, was getting on board when Andrew asked: "Hadn't you better bring your coat and boots?"

Whitney found it something of a relief to laugh as he went back for the things, and Andrew pushed the punt off when he got on board.

"I'll paddle while you keep the young ass in the well," he said. "Knock him down if he tries to get up."

"Don't want to get up," Dick remarked. "Quite snug down here. Only trouble is I'm sitting in the eggs."

"I think that's correct," said Whitney. "*In* is the proper word. There's rather a mess on your face, too."

"Good shot, ole man," Dick observed, with a grin.

Andrew said nothing as he swung the long paddle, for the ripples were getting larger as they left the sand, and the breeze was freshening, but by and by the yacht's light twinkled in the mist. Getting on board, they hustled Dick below, where Andrew stripped off his wet clothes, and put him into his berth, while Whitney got

the stove to burn. After a time, Dick put out his head.

"Feel I'd like some supper, before I go to sleep."

"You can go to sleep without," said Andrew, sternly.

"I suppose there's no use in talking about it, now, but you've been warned that this kind of thing may kill you."

"I'm 'shured," Dick rejoined. "Good big policy and I don't pay the premiums."

"Who does pay them?" Andrew asked, in a quiet, insistent voice, but Dick grinned.

"That'sh secret, ole man. You're very good fellow, but don't know everything. Don't bother me any more; I'm sleepy."

He was silent after this, but Whitney waited until he thought the lad was really asleep. Then he said: "He looked sober when he joined us at the village."

"I think he was," Andrew agreed. "Perhaps he'd drunk enough to make him want more, and brought a bottle away. No doubt, we'll find it when we clean up the punt." Then he forced a smile. "You'll have to go without your eggs."

"That's obvious. But what did he mean about his being insured, and somebody else's paying the premiums?"

"I don't know and don't expect to get any more information when he's sober, but I'll see what Mackellar thinks. Sometimes I feel like giving up the whole business. Dick's too clever for me, and when I turn to the other matter, I'm brought to a full stop."

Whitney nodded sympathetically. "It's an awkward job, but you won't give up. You're not a quitter, and luck or Mackellar may help you through. Now, I guess we'll go to sleep."

He got into his cot, and the regular splash of ripples against the boat's side, and soft slapping of the halyards on the mast, soon made him drowsy, but the last thing he saw was Andrew, sitting on the opposite locker with a stern, thoughtful face.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ELSIE FINDS A CLUE.

THERE was a touch of frost in the still air and the light was fading, when Elsie, walking homewards, came near Appleyard. A yellow glow lingered in the south-west beyond Criffell's sloping shoulder, which ran up against it, tinged a deep violet. Masses of soft, grey cloud floated above the mountain's summit, but the sky was clear overhead, and a thin new moon grew brighter in the east. This was why the murmur of the sea came out of the distance in a muffled roar, for the tides run fast when the moon is young.

Elsie vacantly noticed how bright the crescent gleamed above the dusky firs, as she entered the gloom of a straggling wood at the foot of the hill on which Appleyard was built. She had been out all the afternoon and now rather shrank from going home, for she felt that a shadow rested upon the house. Dick had returned from a cruise with Andrew, looking dejected and unwell, and she was glad that Whitney had taken both away again, on his motor-bicycle, because Dick had lately had fits of moody restlessness when he was at home. Still, she missed them badly, for her mother was silent and pre-occupied, and when Andrew was away, she found it hard to banish the troubles that seemed to be gathering round. They were worse for being very vaguely defined, but she felt convinced that something sinister was going on.

As she thought of Andrew, however, her face grew gentle and she smiled. She knew his worth and his limitations, and loved him for both. He had his suspicions, too, and would follow where they led. Andrew was not the man to shrink a painful duty, but she could not openly help him yet. That might come, and, in the meanwhile, she would at least put no obstacle in his way. Still, if her fears were justified,

the situation was daunting and she might need her courage.

Then, as she neared the lodge, she saw a man loitering in the shadow and stopped when she was close to him.

“Are you waiting for somebody, Jock?” she asked.

Marshall, the fisherman, turned and looked at her thoughtfully. “Weel,” he said, “they telt me Mr. Andrew’s no’ at home.”

“Did you want to see him about the yacht?”

“It wasna’ that, a’thegither.”

Elsie waited, knowing the man she had to deal with, and he resumed: “Ye see, I’ve missed him twice and I’m for Stranraer the morn. We’re gaun west to try the herring fishing.”

“And you wanted to tell Mr. Johnstone something before you left? Can I give him a message when he comes back?”

Marshall looked hard at her, and she thought he hesitated. “Weel,” he said, “ye can tell him that the *Nance* cam’ up the Firth the night before he started for Edinbro’; that’s a while ago, ye mind. Last night she cam’ up again, wi’ the same crew; the Edinbro’ man I telt him o’, anither wha keeps a trawl boat doon the Colvend shore, and yin who has a reid moustache.”

Elsie started and wondered whether she had betrayed her surprise. “I’ll try to remember. I suppose this is for Mr. Johnstone, alone?”

“Just that,” said Marshall. “I’m thinking it would be better that ye telt naebody else.”

He moved off, and Elsie, looking round a few moments afterwards, saw that he had vanished. It was nearly dark among the trees, but she knew she could have seen him had he kept on the road; besides, his heavy, tacketed boots would have made some noise and she had heard nothing. A strip of grass, however, ran along the broken hedge, and she remembered that Marshall was suspected of poaching; but it was strange that he should creep into the wood while she was about.

Then she saw a figure coming from the lodge and her brain acted quickly, because she thought it was Staffer.

Marshall had hinted it was important that his message should be kept secret, and fishermen had good sight. He must have noticed her uncle before she did and did not want to be seen talking to her. Then she remembered that the night before Andrew started for Edinburgh was when Williamson and the man with the red moustache had entered the house. The latter, whose movements Andrew was obviously curious about, had come up the Firth in one of the salmon boats, shortly before his visit to Appleyard, and had been there again without her seeing him. This might mean much, and she felt a thrill that was half apprehension and half excitement, as she went on slowly. The lodge was about a hundred yards away when she met Staffer.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said. "Have you any reason to doubt the honesty of our servants?"

Elsie saw where his question led and tried to nerve herself. He was a clever man and she was young and inexperienced, but she must keep cool.

"No," she said, "I have none, and mother's quite satisfied with them. But why do you ask?"

"You'll remember the night Williamson arrived rather late. He lost a paper in an envelope, and it looks as if somebody in the house had picked it up."

"Have you inquired about it?" Elsie rejoined, remembering that it was the man with the red moustache who had dropped the envelope.

"No," said Staffer, carelessly; "I didn't want to make the thing look more important than it was and thought the envelope might turn up."

"But it must be of some consequence, or you wouldn't bother about it now."

"That's obviously true. It has become important since we lost it. It gave us some particulars that we find we can't remember."

The explanation sounded plausible, but Elsie was not satisfied. She thought the value of the document had been realized on the last visit of the stranger with the red moustache, whom Staffer had, no doubt, met on the previous night.

"Well," she said, "I don't believe the envelope will be found."

"It was dropped in the house," Staffer replied. "Somebody must have seen it."

Elsie wondered whether he suspected her. He had seen her looking down from the landing and might not have been satisfied that she had come to see who was in the house; the men had been careful to make no noise. This, however, was only half the trouble. He was her uncle and had treated her mother well. She did not answer, and he resumed: "If the thing doesn't turn up, I'll dismiss everybody about the place. We can't have people round us whom it's impossible to trust."

"None of the servants found it," Elsie said, with forced quietness.

"You seem strangely sure of this!" he exclaimed, moving nearer and looking into her face.

Elsie hesitated. She could not allow innocent people to suffer for what she had done, but the matter had greater issues. Though much was dark, it was clear that she and Andrew were on one side, and Staffer and his friends on the other. Andrew could be trusted, but Staffer could not. For all that, she felt the tie of kinship and could not act treacherously to him.

"I am sure," she said, slowly. "I found the envelope."

Although the light was bad, she saw his face change, and grew afraid. There was a fury she shrank from in his eyes, but he kept his self-control.

"Then you were downstairs that night."

"I was," she said, and waited with tingling nerves, though she thought the worst was past. For a moment or two she had, perhaps, been in danger.

"What did you do with the thing?" he asked, harshly. "Did you give it to Andrew Johnstone?"

"Why do you imagine I did that?"

Staffer saw he had blundered by hinting that the paper related to matters about which he and Andrew were opposed.

"Never mind," he said. "Answer me."

"I burned it at once, without opening it."

He looked at her as if he found this impossible to believe, and she added with forced calm: "It is quite true."

"But why? You steal a letter belonging to my guest, which you must have thought important, and then burn it unread. Do you expect me to understand your action? The thing seems purposeless."

"It isn't easy to explain, but I must try," she answered, nerving herself for an effort.

"That's obvious," he rejoined, grimly.

"Then I knew that something not right was going on."

"Ah!" he interrupted. "Did you know what it was?"

Elsie made a negative sign. "I really didn't want to know, but I felt that the letter was dangerous. If I had read it, I might have been forced to tell what I found out, so I put it straight into the fire."

"Knowing its loss might embarrass Williamson or me!"

"Yes," she said, "I thought of that. But I felt it would be safer for us all if I burned the paper."

"We'll go in," he said, turning towards the lodge, and when they were walking up the drive, resumed: "I suppose you understand that what you have admitted must make a difference? You set yourself against me."

"If I had meant to injure you, I would have kept the letter, but I won't urge this. If Appleyard were yours, I would go away at once, but it is Dick's and he could not get on without my mother."

"Then you mean to stay and continue spying on my guests?"

"No," said Elsie. "So long as no harm comes to Dick or Andrew, I shall leave you and your friends alone."

Staffer laughed. "I'm afraid you're letting your imagination run away with you. What harm could come to either of them through me? Indeed, I expect Dick would be the first to admit that I've been a pretty good stepfather. But we'll say no more about it, just now."

He left her at the door and she went to her room and sat down, feeling rather limp, for the strain had told on her. Besides, she had got a shock, for her suspicions were no longer vague. She had found a clue and began to see where it led. Andrew was obviously watching the mouth of the Firth, while Rankine had some mysterious business farther west. Marshall thought it well that Andrew should know that the man with the red moustache had come from the suspected neighbourhood late at night, in a salmon boat. The man had been at Appleyard, where he dropped an important letter, and had apparently come again. Williamson, and, no doubt, Staffer, were in league with him, and it looked as if their business was treasonable.

This filled her with alarm, but she was glad she had told Staffer she had found the envelope. After all, he was her uncle and to have kept silence would have been treacherous; but the struggle between family obligations and her duty to the State got keener. It was unthinkable that she should spy upon a kinsman to whom she owed much; but would she not, in a sense, be an accomplice if she allowed him and the others to carry on their plots? This question, however, was dismissed for a time. There were other points to think about.

Did Staffer imagine she was in Andrew's confidence and secretly helping him, when he asked if she had

given him the letter ; and had he believed her statement that she had destroyed it ? If not, she was, perhaps, in some danger, because his laughing remark about her imagination had not been convincing. But, after all, what could he do ? She could hardly be kidnapped and smuggled out of the country. This was too melodramatic a supposition, and it was, of course, absurd to think of his attempting anything worse. She would let it go and ponder what she must do.

After a time, she began to see her way. She would not watch her uncle, but if chance brought her clear proof that he was helping her country's enemies, she would see that he was stopped. This was a compromise that she suspected could hardly be justified, but the next decision was easier, because it had to do with those she loved. If Staffer or his friends plotted any harm to Dick or Andrew, she would remorselessly use every weapon she had against him.

Then she roused herself and bathed her face and hands, for she had felt some physical strain while she thrashed out the painful matter. She would need calm and courage to meet Staffer as if nothing had happened and hide her trouble from her mother. The part she had chosen was difficult, but she must play it out. When she went in to dinner she did not know whether she was relieved or not by Staffer's smile, but he talked to her with the suave good-humour he generally showed.

Two days after this, Andrew and Whitney were sitting in a Melrose hotel, when a post card from Stranraer was brought the former. There was a tarry fingermark at the bottom and it was signed J. Marshall, in a straggling hand. Andrew gave it to Whitney who read :

" As I'm away at the fishing, it might be weel if ye cam' home and lookit after the boat. Miss Elsie will give ye a bit message. I would not leave her until the tides get low."

Then he looked up with a smile. " You Scots are

a remarkably cautious and capable lot. I can imagine the wrinkled old image writing this, with a wooden face and a chuckle inside. The meaning of the last sentence is cleverly ambiguous. I suppose the boat is quite all right ? ”

“ She is,” said Andrew. “ No tide could hurt her. Try to be serious.”

“ I will. It’s plain that Marshall thinks you’re wanted ; probably on Miss Woodhouse’s account. I can have the bicycle ready in five minutes, and if we pull out now, we can be home soon after dark. Will you tell Dick ? ”

“ No. We’ll put him in the train, if there is one. Get that railway guide.”

Whitney opened it. “ If you mean to see him off, you’ll have to wait an hour, but, on the whole, you better had. He seems to have made a number of acquaintances in the bar. Anyhow, with this light frost, the roads will be good and hard.”

Dick showed some unwillingness to leave the town, but Andrew was firm and put him in the train. When it started, he joined Whitney, who was waiting outside the station with the bicycle.

“ Now,” he said, as he got into the side-car, “ you can let her go.”

The light was getting dim as they ran down the long dip to Hawick, though pale saffron, barred with leaden grey, shone above the western hills. When they swept down the last hill, frosty mist hung about the woollen mills in the hollow, and Whitney throttled his engine as they jolted past glimmering lights and half-seen houses.

“ It doesn’t look very cheerful for a fifty-mile run, but I suppose you want to get on,” he remarked.

“ Yes,” said Andrew. “ I hope Dick won’t miss the train at one of the junctions, but he’ll be all right if he reaches Carlisle. He can’t well get into trouble at the place we stay at there.”

The mist melted into the keen brightness of a frosty night as they climbed beside Teviot to the snow-sprinkled moors. Whitney's eyes were watering and his hands numb as they crossed the high watershed.

"We haven't lost much time, so far, but I suppose I'd better let her go all out," he said. "There oughtn't to be much traffic on the road."

Andrew nodded and pulled the rug tighter round him as the bicycle leaped forward down hill. He was eager to get back, for he felt anxious. It was not for nothing that Marshall had warned him that he was wanted. There was moonlight in the shallow depression that led down from the summit, but soon the hilltops rose higher and they plunged into a dark glen. A glimmer of light flashed up to meet them, and, as the side-car, rocking wildly, raced past the Mossaul Hotel, Andrew remembered what had happened there a few months ago. He had seen since then that Dick had not been in much danger when Staffer's car swerved; the risk of being struck down had been run by him. Well, that did not matter much. If anybody was threatened now, it was neither himself nor Dick, and it was horrible to feel that Elsie might be in some danger. Whitney was driving recklessly fast, but Andrew frowned impatiently as he watched the hillsides unfold out of the dark and rush by while the throbbing of the engine filled the narrow glen.

They swung out at Ewes doors, leaning over hard as the car took the curve with an inch or two between the wheel and the drop to the burn. Then the widening valley grew bright again and they raced up and down rolling hillsides, past scattered farms and white cothouses, until the lights of Langholm stretched across the hollow. Whitney slowed his engine here, but they narrowly escaped the wall, as they took the bridge below the town, and then sped on again furiously through the woods that line the brawling Esk.

Appleyard was reached in time for dinner, and

Andrew, who was stiff with cold, was relieved to find that Staffer was not at home. Everything was as usual; it was difficult to imagine any cause for alarm, and he wondered whether he had been needlessly disturbed. After dinner, Mrs. Woodhouse took Whitney into the drawing-room and Andrew found Elsie knitting in a corner of the hall.

She looked up with a smile when he sat down close by.

"Haven't you come home earlier than you planned?" she asked.

Andrew studied her face. It was quiet and undisturbed, but he knew Elsie well and suspected a thoughtfulness she meant to hide.

"Yes," he said. "I got a post card from Marshall. He's at Stranraer and seemed to think I ought to look after the boat."

"The boat? But it's fine weather. Isn't she quite safe?"

"I expect so. Still, the tides are pretty high and run up the gutter fast."

Elsie counted her stitches, and then gave him a quiet look. "Dick was with you, so it couldn't have been on his account you came back."

"No," said Andrew, smiling; "that's obvious."

She was silent for a time, with a faint touch of colour in her face. His explanation about the boat had not deceived her and she had noted his searching glance when he first came in. Marshall, who must have been hiding close by when she was talking to Staffer, had given Andrew a hint and it was for her sake he had hurried back. She knew he had hurried, because she had tactfully led Whitney into making some admissions about their speed. She hardly thought she had been in actual danger, but she was quite safe now, and her heart went out to the man who had come to help. If only she could confide in him! But this was impossible. His loyalty to her made her feel more strongly that she

could not betray her uncle and bring disgrace upon her mother.

"Well," she said, "Marshall gave me a message for you. I'll deliver it as nearly as I can."

She watched him as she related what the fisherman had said. Andrew was a bad actor and she was not misled by his clumsy indifference. It looked as if he knew that the man with the red moustache had dealings with Williamson and Staffer. Well, unless something fresh transpired that demanded her interference, she would try to remain neutral for her mother's sake; but if Andrew were threatened in any way, Staffer must take the consequences.

"Thank you," he said. "I expect we'll have to go west again, before long."

Elsie put down her knitting. "Then you'll be careful, Andrew. I want you to keep out of danger."

His heart beat fast, for he saw that she was anxious about him. Elsie knew something and would be sorry if he got hurt, but he must not alarm her or show where his suspicions led.

"Of course I will," he answered cheerfully. "As a matter of fact, I'm not running much risk."

"I'd sooner you didn't think so; it leads to carelessness," she said, getting up. "You won't be rash."

"Certainly not. But why are you anxious?"

"I'm afraid I'm selfish, and, perhaps, imaginative; but that's partly your fault for spoiling me. I seem to feel that trouble is hanging over us and I want to have you near."

Andrew smiled as he made a gesture of dissent. "Selfishness isn't a failing of yours, but we'll let that go. If ever I'm wanted, I expect you'll find me somewhere about, but whether I'll be of much use is another thing. And now we'll go and see what your mother and Jim are doing."

CHAPTER XXVII.

MACKELLAR'S DISCOVERY.

ANDREW spent a week at Appleyard, without noticing anything that caused him uneasiness, and then got a letter from Rankine asking him to meet him in the pool behind the Ross, near Kirkcudbright. He would sooner not have gone, but thought he might get back in three or four days, and Staffer was going up to town. Besides, Dick would be at home to take care of Elsie.

Sailing at high-tide with a keen east wind blowing down the Firth, he found water across the sands to the mouth of the Nith, where he left the boat and drove to Dumfries. Here, he and Whitney called upon Mackellar, who took them into his private office and gave orders that they were not to be disturbed.

"I have some news that may surprise ye," the banker said. "Dick's principal creditor is his step-father. Here's a list o' his obligations, though I'm no' sure it's complete."

"Ah!" said Andrew. "I don't know whether I'm surprised or not, but I begin to see a light." He frowned, as he noted the figures, and resumed: "It won't be an easy matter to pay this off and the estate will feel the strain for some time. But how has the young idiot got rid of the money?"

"Betting, I expect."

"He doesn't go to many races, and turf accountants wouldn't deal with a lad under age."

"Verra true," Mackellar agreed, with some dryness. "Dick would get somebody else to put the money on for him; or, at least, that's no doubt what he thought he did. Williamson, or one o' his friends, would be willing."

"Why do you say it's what Dick thought?"

"I have my doubts whether his go-between made the

bets at all. Where was the need? The fellow had only to take the money when Dick lost."

"But Dick's not quite a fool; he wouldn't back the wrong horse every time. He reads the sporting papers and I suppose their forecasts are right now and then."

Mackellar smiled. "If he's no' a fool, he's near it. A tip anybody can buy for a penny is no' of much account, but it's flattering to feel ye ken the secrets o' the inside ring. Staffer's friends would see he had that satisfaction. In other words, they'd tell him how he ought to bet with them, and, although they'd let him win at times, I imagine they found it a profitable game."

"It must be stopped," said Andrew.

"Just so, but I expect ye would prefer it to be stopped quietly. There's another thing I learned and ye put me on the track when ye told me what Dick said about his being insured. A policy has been taken out for a large sum."

Andrew made an abrupt movement and Whitney looked puzzled.

"That's pretty hard to understand," the latter said. "I reckon his is not the kind of life they'd take except at a big premium."

"It gave me something to think about and I have not come to the bottom o' it yet. It's possible the insurance was effected some time ago, before Dick's weakness had developed. His parents were sound, and it was long before we suspected there was anything wrong with him. However, I had an interview with the company's local agent and afterwards with the Edinburgh manager."

"What did you learn?" Andrew asked.

"Nothing much," Mackellar owned, with a gleam of amusement. "In fact, I'm thinking I met my match; the heads o' that office are men o' some ability, and I had no good ground for interference. For a' that, they know something and if it was offered the

bank in the way o' business, I would not make a big advance against the policy."

"In whose favour is it drawn?" Whitney asked.

"I cannot tell ye; they were verra reserved gentlemen, but the name would no' be Staffer's, though the transaction would be ultimately to his benefit. Mr. Staffer's a man o' retiring habits."

Andrew was silent for a minute and then looked up. "I see now that I have suspected something like this from the beginning. But how did you find out so much?"

"A bank agent has some power. Maybe I abused it," Mackellar answered with a twinkle.

"Well, what are we to do?"

Mackellar's face hardened. "I think we'll see Mr. Staffer and tell him what we know. It's possible he'll fight, but that's no' what I would expect. I'm most concerned about Dick's attitude. We cannot do much if he's against us."

"I imagine Dick knows something," Andrew replied, with a thoughtful air. "He's been rather a puzzle, lately. I'll be away for a few days, but we'll interview Staffer as soon as I'm back."

Mackellar said he expected to call at Appleyard shortly, and would make an appointment then, and Andrew and Whitney drove back to the yacht. Getting under way at once, they sailed down channel with the last of the ebb between wastes of drying sand, and dusk found them slowly forging out to sea against the incoming flood. They met Rankine where he had arranged, and carrying out his instructions sailed east again, and one evening landed from the dinghy at the mouth of the buoyed gutter. It was near low water and the tide had run far out. Fine rain was falling and it was very dark, but as they waded ashore through the fringe of splashing ripples, an indistinct figure appeared at the edge of the bank.

"Is that you, Jock?" Andrew called, and Marshall came up.

" I startit when yere letter came and Mistress Wilson at the wee shop in the clachan has taen me in," he said.

" Did you keep the letter ? "

" Na," said Marshall, " I pit it in the fire."

Andrew nodded. " Then I suppose you understand what you are to do."

" I'm to try the net-fishing for flounders and keep my een open, though it's no' just the season the flat fish come up on the banks. They telt me, at the clachan, there were verra few to be had, but I alloood they couldna' be scarcer than Loch Ryan herring."

" He's got it right," Whitney remarked, and beckoned Marshall. " Come along and take your net. You'll have to carry it up the bank ; the dinghy's loaded deep and the tide's still running out."

When they had dragged the net ashore, Marshall, who lighted a lantern, examined it carefully. Whitney, picking up the light, by and by, turned it on his wrinkled face and was not surprised to see a twinkle in his eyes.

" What do you think of it ? " he asked.

" It's gran' gear, but maybe, a bit heavy for flounders. I wouldna' say but the heid-rope would haud a shark."

" It's better to be on the safe side. When you set a net you can't tell what you're going to catch. That's why we brought you some iron pipes for the posts. Now you'd better show us where you want the thing put up."

They went back and pushed off the dinghy while Marshall plodded up the bank abreast of them with the net on his shoulder. After a time, he hailed them at a bend of the narrowing channel.

" She'll do here, though I dinna' ken aboot the fishery board," he said, when they landed and gave him the iron posts. " Ye're no alloood to stop a through-running watter."

" I'll be responsible for that," Andrew told him.

"Then it would be a kind o' pity to leave yon gutter open," said Marshall, who turned to Whitney. "A flounder-net in a run-way only fishes on the ebb. Ye haul her up to the heid-rope when the fish come in with the flood, and let her doon when high-watter's past. Then a' that's gone by her canna' get back. Onyway, yon's the usual plan, but she'd maybe fish better here if we keepit her doon with lead and pulled her up afterwards wi' a heid-rope tackle."

"I was going to suggest something of the kind," Andrew agreed. "You'll want a boat, but there are two or three old punts on the beach. Hire which you like and I'll be accountable. But what about the trawler fellow who keeps the boat at the point?"

"They telt me he's awa' doon west."

"Very well. You can begin to put up your stakes, using the pipe. We have another job to look after, but we'll come back when it's done."

Whitney shoved the dinghy off and they paddled up the channel. It was very dark and the rain made the obscurity worse, but Andrew searched one bank carefully as the dinghy crept along its edge. Everything was quiet, for there seemed to be no birds about, but they could hear the thud of Marshall's hammer as he drove in the pipes. Whitney, sitting aft, felt damp and cold as the water trickled down his oilskins.

"How much do you think the old fellow suspects?" he asked.

"I can't tell. He suspects something and I didn't try to put him off the track. There were one or two reasons for thinking I'd better not. Anyhow, he's to be trusted. Now where's the corner buoy?"

Whitney laughed. "If you were anybody else, I'd allow you wouldn't find it on a night like this. You don't know it was on a corner to begin with."

"Well," said Andrew, "I'm pretty confident about hitting it in the next few minutes."

He pulled on steadily, while the rain ran down his

face and trickled from the dinghy's thwarts. The bank was scarcely distinguishable a few yards away, but the water had not the opaque blackness of the sand, and Whitney scanned its surface narrowly. There was not a ripple, for the stream was slackening, and the channel was smooth as oil except for the disturbance the dinghy made. He could hear the water she displaced lap upon the sand astern, but there was nothing on the narrow dark strip ahead.

"You haven't made a centre shot this time," he said, presently.

Andrew laughed, and pulling hard on one oar, swung the dinghy round. "The buoy's certainly not in the water and now we'll try the bank. The tide hadn't ebbed so far when we were here last."

They landed, and after ploughing for a time through slushy sand, Whitney caught his foot in a rope.

"You've struck it, after all," he said, as he followed up the rope to a ring of large net-corks. "Now, I guess we'd better get to work."

Returning to the spot where the rope came out of the sand, he began to dig with a spade they had brought, but did not make much progress. Water and soft ooze ran back into the hole almost as fast as he could throw them out, his heavy boots sank into the yielding ground, and his oilskins hampered him. When he was hot and breathless, Andrew took the spade.

"The fellow who moored the buoy here, didn't mean it to go adrift," he said, as he flung the wet sand about.

By and by, the spade jarred upon something hard, and he worked its edge under the object while Whitney seized the rope. For a time, they tugged and wrenched at it, and then, when they were gasping and splashed all over, a heavy stone slowly rolled out of its muddy bed. Andrew let it lie and walked back a short distance towards higher ground.

"The next step needs care," he remarked. "We mustn't move the stone far, because that would show

its position had been changed, but as the bank's steep, a few yards will make a difference. If I can shorten the depth by half a fathom, it will satisfy me."

Whitney chuckled. "That ought to be enough. When your draught's pretty deep it's embarrassing to find half a fathom less water than you expect."

"Well," said Andrew, after carefully estimating the difference of level, "I think we'll put it here."

It took them some time to move and bury the heavy stone and when they had finished, Whitney asked: "What about the fairway buoy?"

"We'll let that stop. I want our man to get in and his troubles had better not begin until he's going back. The flood would soon float the vessel off if she grounded going up, but it will be a different matter coming down when the tide's on the ebb. Now we'll go back to the dinghy."

They pushed her off and Whitney pulled away against the stream, which was beginning to run up the channel. The rain had got heavier, but they could hear Marshall's hammer as he drove down the stakes, and when they were abreast of him, Whitney stopped rowing. For a few minutes the fisherman stood beside the dinghy while Andrew gave him instructions, and then vanished into the gloom as Whitney pulled away. Andrew lighted a small lantern and putting it beside a compass in the bottom of the craft, kept his comrade on his course.

"Harder with your left; the tide's on our port bow," he said. "Steady at that; we're round the point. Pull as even as you can."

The sharper rise and fall and the splashing about the craft showed Whitney that they had reached open water, but he had no other guide. They had left no light on the *Rowan* and black darkness enveloped the dinghy. The faint glow from the lantern in her bottom made it worse, and all that Whitney could see was Andrew's face and the wet front of his sou'wester as he

bent over the compass. The rest of his figure melted into the surrounding gloom. Whitney was tired and wet, and gritty sand scraped the backs of his hands as his oilskin's sleeves rubbed across them. There was some risk of Andrew's not finding the yacht, and he must pull hard to reach her before the tide got too strong.

This was very different from yachting in hot weather on the Canadian lakes and Long Island Sound, but it had a fascination he would not have thought possible a few months ago. Andrew and he were playing a bold and somewhat dangerous game, the end of which, he thought, could not be long delayed. As an American, he had no stake on it, except, perhaps, his life, but he understood his comrade's patriotic keenness and meant to see him through. Then he had read enough about the sinking of unarmed merchant ships and the drowning of their crews to fire his blood. He thought this was excuse enough for not observing a strict neutrality, but as he felt the dinghy lurch across the swell and heard the hoarse murmur of the surf upon the shoals, he owned that the sport was in itself engrossing.

He had caught the big grey trout of the lone North-West, the bass, and the fighting tarpon, but he was now angling for fiercer prey and hoped the murderous steel monsters that lurked in the dark water would rise to the bait. They were handled with a relentless cunning that struck him as devilish, and Rankine had hinted that two of the largest and fastest were not far away, lying in wait for a huge new battleship that was coming from the Clyde. Whitney could not think calmly of her lurching under, shattered by a torpedo, with her swarming crew. Besides, his partner had resolved that this should not happen.

"Pull with your right," said Andrew. "She's sagging to loo'ard, now."

They crept on against the tide, Whitney panting as he tugged at the oars, for he had had enough, and it

was with keen satisfaction he obeyed the order Andrew gave him, by and by.

“Hard with your left; let her swing. I see the boat!”

Whitney got a glimpse of a rocking mast, as the dinghy came round, and, a few moments afterwards, put out his hand to ease the shock as they ran alongside. A quarter of an hour later the anchor was on deck and they went eastwards with the flood under easy sail.

“You might put on the kettle. It will be high water before we’re up the Firth,” Andrew said. “If we can get our business with Staffer done to-morrow, we’ll sail again for the wreck as soon as it gets dark.”

Whitney hesitated a moment before he replied: “I expect it will be our last visit. No doubt you see the consequences if we catch our man at work.”

“They’re obvious, but must be faced,” said Andrew. “Perhaps I’ve held back longer than I should, but it wasn’t for my own sake and I can’t shirk my duty now.”

There was nothing more to be said, but Whitney sympathized with his comrade, as he went below.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE RECKONING DAY.

IT was getting dark in the library at Appleyard, and Mackellar, who had been speaking, stopped and waited while a servant lighted the lamps. Staffer leaned back in his chair as if the interruption was some relief, but Mackellar sat grim and upright, watching him. Irvine, the other executor of Dick’s father’s will, nervously fingered his gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and Andrew found the servant’s deliberate movements exasperating. He wanted the matter settled, because the situation was painful and galling to his family pride, while the cautious way Mackellar

had led up to the climax, had tried his patience. So far, Staffer had made no reply.

At length the servant withdrew, and the feeling of tension grew keener after the soft snap of the closing door. They could now see each other's faces and all looked somewhat strained. Nobody spoke for a few moments, and Irvine began to polish his eye-glasses with his handkerchief.

"It might now be well if Mr. Staffer would tell us his views," he said. "I think Mackellar has made ours plain."

Staffer seemed to rouse himself. "It's obvious that you want to get rid of me. Your suggestion is that I should relinquish control of Dick and leave Appleyard at once?"

"Just that," said Irvine. "I see no other way."

"Does your demand extend to my sister and niece?"

"It does not," Mackellar replied. "We all think it would be an advantage if Mrs. Woodhouse stayed at Appleyard, and, with Dick's consent, we would make her a suitable allowance. The management of the household could not be in better hands."

"That's some relief," said Staffer. "Now, in the ordinary course of things, my authority here would terminate very soon, when Dick is twenty-one, and I should be willing to go then. Is it worth while to make a drastic change, which would inconvenience everybody, for so short a time?"

Andrew, who was rather surprised by Staffer's half-conciliatory attitude, thought he saw anxiety in his face. It looked as if the man had some strong reason for not wanting to leave Appleyard yet.

"Our opinion is that it would be well worth while," said Irvine, dryly.

"Then suppose I refuse to go? How do you propose to turn me out?"

"We'll apply for the necessary powers," Mackellar answered.

“ Do you expect to get them ? ”

“ I think it's verra possible. If ye force us, it's our intention to try.”

“ Very well. Do you mind telling me what grounds you mean to urge ? ”

Mackellar sorted the papers in his hand, and Andrew marked his quiet deliberation. Indeed, in spite of a certain feeling of tension, the proceedings had, so far, been characterized by a curious calm. Perhaps this was because three of the actors were Scotch, but Andrew felt that the calm was deceptive. The situation had strong dramatic force.

“ I cannot see why ye should not know,” Mackellar replied. “ I would begin by proving undue and dangerous influence on a young man of extravagant habits who had been placed in your charge.”

“ Can you prove it ? ”

“ Weel,” said Mackellar, “ these figures relating to money lent and bills discounted, would go some length, particularly when it was shown that ye concealed the part ye took by acting through agents.”

He read out particulars of the money borrowed, with the high rate of interest charged, and traced the transactions back to Staffer through other hands. It was a telling accusation and Andrew thought Staffer was surprised by Mackellar's knowledge and felt alarmed.

“ I'm not sure that we could not establish a charge o' conspiracy,” Mackellar concluded.

“ There is no fraud,” Staffer objected. “ The terms were stated ; Dick knew what he would have to pay.”

“ He did not know to whom he would have to pay it,” Irvine interposed.

Staffer was silent for a moment, and then said : “ You can do nothing without Dick's consent. Why did you not let him speak for himself ? Are you afraid of him ? ”

“ We found ye had sent him to Dumfries,” Mackellar rejoined. “ It looked as if ye did not expect him back

to-night, and we thought ye would prefer that he was not consulted yet. But there's another matter; the insurance policy, by which we have ground for believing ye would ultimately benefit."

"What do you know about that?"

"At present, we do not know everything, but there's much that we suspect, considering the state o' Dick's health."

Staffer looked hard at him. "Do you imply that Dick's health is very bad?"

"Ye should ken," Mackellar said, dryly.

Andrew thought Staffer looked puzzled, as if he suspected the other of knowing more than he did himself, but he asked: "Is it your intention to dispute my claim or disown Dick's debts?"

Mackellar took up a paper. "It is not; here's a memorandum of our terms, which ye would be wise in agreeing to. I'll read them out."

He did so, and Staffer smiled. "Then, if threats prove useless, you mean to bribe me to go. Suppose I demanded payment in full before I left? Would the estate finances stand it?"

"They would," said Irvine. "That's a point we have carefully examined. It would entail some economy, afterwards, but, in my opinion, the money would be well spent."

Staffer's face hardened, as if he had not expected this. Indeed, Andrew thought he had hoped that a demand for a prompt settlement would embarrass his antagonists.

"Very well. Give me another three months here, and I'll accept."

"Our offer is made on the understanding that you go at once."

"Then I'm afraid you'll have to turn me out and you may find it hard. But you haven't answered a point I raised. Suppose Dick takes my side and insists upon my staying?"

"It would be a difficulty," Mackellar conceded. "For a' that, our being executors would warrant our interference, and there's another party on whose behalf we could make a plea. Mr. Andrew Johnstone could claim the protection o' his interest as the next heir, on the grounds o' the direct inheritor's dangerous health."

"Would you urge this in court?"

"If we were forced," Mackellar said, dryly.

Then Staffer's self-control gave way and he turned to Andrew with a savage, sneering laugh.

"So *you* are responsible for the extraordinary line these gentlemen have taken! You have been counting on your cousin's death."

"No," said Andrew, with a flush. "I came home from Canada to take care of him. Still, I agree with the executors."

"Then you wouldn't mind what people thought if you let Mackellar make use of your interest in the estate?"

"Not if it was needful," Andrew replied, with stern quietness. "If you can still persuade Dick to believe in you, he must be saved in spite of himself."

Staffer gave him a curious look. It was plain that Andrew was his most troublesome antagonist, and there was something in his expression that disturbed Mackellar.

"Very well," he said. "You must do what you think fit. I shall stay at Appleyard until you turn me out."

He rose, as if to intimate that there was no more to be said, and Andrew, who accompanied the others to the car that was waiting at the door, afterwards found Whitney and told him what they had done.

"I reckon you'll have to be careful, partner," the latter remarked. "It's a sure thing the man doesn't like you, and he might be dangerous now."

"Well," said Andrew, thoughtfully, "I must try to avoid risks. But we must get down the Firth, to-night, and you had better bring the bicycle round as soon as you're ready."

A quarter of an hour later, he came downstairs,

dressed in a thick jersey and his old boating clothes, and met Elsie in the hall. She thought his face was stern.

"Are you going to sea again, to-night?" she asked, in some surprise.

"Yes," he said. "I didn't know beforehand whether I could get away until to-morrow. As a matter of fact, I don't want to go at all, but I must."

"You feel it's your duty?" she suggested, with a searching look.

He made a sign of agreement, and she put her hand gently on his arm.

"Then you must go, but I'm anxious, Andrew, and you'll be careful for my sake. You see, I have come to depend on you and feel that something is threatening us all."

He thrilled at her touch, and it cost him a stern effort to stand as if unmoved while he noted the tenderness in her eyes and the flicker of colour in her face.

"You mustn't imagine things."

"Tell me the truth, Andrew. Am I mistaken?"

"Well," he said, quietly, "perhaps Appleyard has, so to speak, been under a cloud for some time, but I see the light breaking. In fact, the shadow may be gone in the next few days. But you may need some courage. I know you have it."

"Ah!" she said. "Then I may have to suffer something you cannot save me from; you would if you could."

"That's true, but my power is limited."

Elsie smiled. "You don't protest much; but one likes people who are better than their word. Am I allowed to ask what you were talking about in the library?"

"I'm sorry I can't tell you now," Andrew replied, with an embarrassed air. "I may be able to do so when I come back."

"You mean that something may happen while you are away that would make it easier, or perhaps, necessary?"

"Yes," said Andrew, "I think that's what I meant."

She gave him her hand with a gentle look. "Then

I must wait. But you won't be rash. Remember that I shall be anxious about you ! ”

He left her, and for a time she sat quietly in the hall. Andrew was not going on a shooting cruise ; it was a more serious business he was engaged in and she had already connected it with Rankine and the sinking of the merchant ships. The reasons that led her to this conclusion were not very clear, but she felt that Williamson and the man with the red moustache had something to do with the matter. She wondered whether she ought to warn Andrew, but thought he was already suspicious, and she could not betray her uncle's complicity unless she was certain that Andrew was in danger. Staffer had left her alone since her confession about the letter, but she felt that some dramatic stroke that would bring things to a climax was being planned.

Then she roused herself and went to see if Madge Whitney's room was ready and the fire burning, for Madge was coming to spend a week with them, and the car had gone to meet her. Madge arrived by and by, but when the party gathered in the drawing-room after dinner, conversation dragged. Staffer had gone out, Mrs. Woodhouse had less to say than usual, and Elsie felt disturbed. Madge said the journey had given her a headache, and Dick, who had returned from Dumfries, looked ill. Now and then he tried to talk humorously, but his gaiety was forced and the effort it cost him marked. It was a relief when Mrs. Woodhouse said they had better go to bed, and Elsie went with Madge to her room. Madge made her take a low chair by the fire, and then sat down on the rug.

“ Now,” she said, “ what's the matter with you all ? ”

“ I don't know,” said Elsie. “ I don't feel very gay, but you didn't cheer us much. I'm sorry your head aches.”

“ It was pretty bad. You see, it's most twenty miles from Craigwhinnie to Newton Stewart station, and when I was leaving, the car wouldn't start until

they'd tinkered with the magneto. That made us late and there was a freezing wind in our faces as they rushed her down the valley. When we ran up the hill from the town to the station, the train was ready to pull out, and I'd only time to jump into a small, hot car without bothering about my baggage. In consequence of being late, I had a small adventure."

"How was that?" Elsie asked indifferently.

"When we stopped at Dumfries, I went to see if they'd got my box. There was another train in and the conductor was busy. Anyhow, they were flagging the train out when I found my box was all right, and, as I ran along the platform I bumped into a man who'd come from the cars across the track. He had his hands full of things and said a kind of swear in German, when he dropped them all about."

"In German!" Elsie exclaimed.

"Sure. Anyhow, as I didn't want him to miss the train, I picked up the nearest thing. It was a nice little box that flew open, and I thought it had a clock inside. Well, he got into my car and began to apologize in very good English, so I asked him what was in the box. I thought he hesitated, but he showed me that it was a compass, with a brass thing that turned round its top and had two little slits for looking through."

"An azimuth; Andrew has one. They're used when you want to be accurate in taking bearings. But go on."

"There's not much more to tell. He was rather a charming man and had been in America. We talked all the way to Annan, where he got out."

"What was he like? I expect you studied him."

"I did," Madge owned, with a smile. "Well, he was tall and generally big; skin fair but sunburned, eyes very light blue, hair between red and brown. He looked like a sailor; a captain or something of the kind, though he was dressed very plainly in thick, blue clothes and had a bundle of oil slickers."

"Had he a red moustache?"

“ He had none at all, but I guess it would be red if he let it grow. Do you know him ? ”

“ No,” said Elsie, quietly, “ at least, I’m not sure.”

Madge gave her a keen look. “ You make me curious ; you find the thing more interesting than you want to show. Now, of course, I thought it strange that a man who spoke good English should relieve his feelings in German when he felt annoyed, and afterwards try to convince me that he wasn’t a foreigner. I think he did try and that was the reason he talked so much.”

“ I was thinking about the compass ; you said it was in a nice little box. They only use things like that on small yachts and boats.”

“ This one was about as long as your hand. But where does the other track that runs into Dumfries come from ? ”

“ From Glasgow.”

“ Oh ! ” said Madge. “ You build warships there, don’t you ? ”

She was silent for a time, and Elsie was glad of an opportunity to regulate her thoughts. She believed Madge had met the man who had dropped the envelope, and it looked significant that he had cut off his moustache. Then he had oilskins and a boat-compass, and left the train at Annan. It gave her a shock to hear that he was again in the neighbourhood. Some mischief was being plotted, but her suspicions were disconnected. There was a break in the chain. Andrew was watching the mouth of the Solway, but the man had come from Glasgow, which was a long way off by sea. While she grappled with the puzzle, Madge opened a travelling bag and took out a railway guide which contained a map of Scotland.

“ Look at this,” she said, indicating Stranraer, Portpatrick, and Ramsey. “ Rankine’s been at these places, because I’ve had notes from him, and you see how they command the way out from the Clyde. His business doesn’t stop at making charts.”

“ Has he told you so ? ”

"No," said Madge, with a blush. "Still, he's admitted something ; you see, we are friends. Besides, he's a smart officer ; they wouldn't waste a man like him on taking soundings. That would be quite absurd."

Elsie's smile was sympathetic, for she thought she understood her friend's belief in Rankine's talents : but Madge resumed, scoring the map with a hairpin ; "Very well. He's here, on guard, in the west ; Andrew's there, about half way between him and Annan ; and now we have a German sailor, who speaks English and has a boat-compass, at the head of the Solway Firth."

Elsie made an abrupt movement, for Madge had found the missing link and the chain was complete. Men were working night and day at armaments and war-ships on the Clyde. Her face was troubled, but her lips set firm, for she began to see that she could no longer keep her secret. The time when she must act had come.

"I think you have guessed right," she said, after a moment or two.

"Then you understand that we have some responsibility."

"I don't see yours."

The colour crept into Madge's face. "Oh ! well. For one thing, my brother's with Andrew." Then she turned, and kneeling on the rug, put her arm round Elsie's waist. "We've got to see this through, my dear."

Elsie's reserve gave way. She wanted a friend she could trust and she could trust Madge.

"Yes," she said, with a steady look, "we must. The man you met has been at Appleyard when they thought we were all asleep, and I'm afraid he'll be here again."

"I see how you're fixed ; but think ! Andrew and Jim may be in danger. We can't let them get hurt."

"That's impossible !" said Elsie, whose face grew hard. "But what must we do ?"

"Watch for the German sailor, first of all," Madge replied. "Try to find out what he has come for, and spoil the plot. I'm glad you gave me the room next

to yours. I can reach you by that inner door, if it's necessary." Then she leaned forward and kissed Elsie. "Now you must go to bed. I have a headache and you look anxious and tired."

CHAPTER XXIX.

DICK GOES TO THE RESCUE.

AFTER a time, Elsie went to sleep, but her rest was broken and once or twice she awoke with a start.

She was uneasy and highly strung, but heard nothing unusual. The wind moaned about the house and the splash of the little burn rose from the glen. Staffer had gone out before dinner and as he had not come back when she went to bed, she did not think any stranger would visit Appleyard. Telling herself that she must not indulge in nerves, she went to sleep again. At length, when lying half awake, she heard a soft rattle, and her heart beat fast, for she knew that the handle of her door was being gently turned. She was glad she had locked it, though this was the first time she had done so.

The sound stopped, a board in the passage creaked, and as the shock of alarm began to pass, Elsie guessed that Staffer had meant to make sure she was in her room. This implied that he was going downstairs to meet somebody, but she waited until she got calmer, wondering if, after all, she had been mistaken. Since Staffer could not have returned until late, it was strange he had allowed his visitor to risk coming to the house when he might be out. She tried to believe he had not done so until she heard a faint tap on the other door, which opened into Madge's room. There was no longer any doubt, and nerving herself for a painful effort, she got up and put on some clothes. Then she went into the other room and saw Madge's shadowy figure standing by the window.

"You heard it?" the latter asked, in a strained voice. "Somebody's gone down. Do you know who it is?"

"Yes," said Elsie, with forced quietness, "it's my uncle."

Madge put out her hand in the dark and touched her sympathetically. "I suppose you see you have to choose between him and Andrew? Guess it's hard, but Andrew's a white man and he's on his country's side."

"He is," Elsie agreed, in a strange, toneless way.

"Then we must find out what's going on. Jim's on board the *Rowan*; and there's the survey ship. I was thinking of them all and couldn't sleep."

"Are you ready to come down?" Elsie asked.

Madge shivered as she opened the door. It was very dark and cold in the passage, and she shrank from the adventure, but went on. Elsie, however, stopped and quietly locked the door, taking out the key. She had better cause to hesitate than Madge, but her resolution was fixed. Andrew might be threatened and that was enough. She loved him, and he loved her, though he had tried to hide it. He was hers, and, with a woman's deep-rooted instincts, she was ready to fight for him. The choice she had made was no longer hard. Her uncle had now no claim on her; he was her lover's enemy. For the time, all complexities had vanished; Elsie was driven by primitive impulses. She would protect Andrew as a mother protects her child.

As they approached the top of the stairs, she put out her hand and stopped Madge.

"Not this way," she whispered. "Follow me close. We'll go down by the back."

They turned into a passage that led through the servants' part of the house. It was dark and narrow, but Elsie moved down the middle and Madge kept behind her. When they reached a small, back landing, Elsie guided her to a hole in the floor, and, putting down her foot cautiously, Madge felt a step. They were newel stairs and the stone struck cold through her stockings as

she tried to find the broader side. By and by she reached level ground, and crept forward behind Elsie, across a large empty space. Madge imagined it was the kitchen, but next moment she struck something that jarred noisily on the floor, and she stopped with a frightened gasp. The sound seemed to echo through the house.

They waited, listening with tingling nerves, but all was silent, and they went on until Elsie, putting both hands on the knob, opened a door. The latch clicked and they stopped again, but heard nothing. The gloom in front was impenetrable, but a draught of cold air touched their faces and Madge thought they were looking into the hall. After a few moments, she heard a sound that suggested a chair being moved, and then a half-distinguishable murmur. It seemed to come from somewhere close by.

"They're in the drawing-room. Wait here," Elsie said quietly, and next moment Madge was alone.

It was very cold and the darkness was daunting, but she tried to brace herself. Andrew was engaged in dangerous work, and the secret conference that was being held in the room across the hall might threaten him. Then Rankine had some part in the business, and she felt a thrill that brought the blood to her face and gave her courage as she determined that no harm should come to him.

By and by she heard a door open some distance off. It looked as if Elsie had gone out, and Madge wondered whether she could get nearer the drawing-room. Advancing cautiously into the hall, she tried to remember where the furniture was, but her outstretched hand struck something that rattled, and she stopped. She had been on the point of knocking down a vase, and it was plain that further progress would involve some risk. A noise would bring the plotters out and she must leave things to Elsie, who had some plan. Madge went back to her post and stood there, highly strung and shivering.

In the meanwhile, Elsie had left the house and crept round it on the grass until she reached a greenhouse built against one side of the drawing-room. The door

was open, as she had expected, and feeling for the edge of a flower-stand, she followed it up until she could crouch down beside the steps leading to a French window. It was closed but not latched, for when she ran her fingers along the joint, she felt an aperture ; but she durst not try to pull it open. Still, she could see in, because although the lamps had not been lighted, an electric torch lay upon its side on the table, and threw a ring of light on the opposite wall, two or three feet from the ground. The rest of the room was dark, but a dim illumination spread beyond the bright beam, and two figures were faintly visible against it.

The men sat at the table, but Elsie could not hear what they said. Their voices were low and they spoke in curt sentences. As soon as they had finished their business, one would get up and go, and she might not be able to steal away in time ; besides, somebody else might come in by the door behind her. She must risk trying to open the window, and she got her nails into the crack, but the hinges began to grate, and she let her hand drop. The voices, however, were now a trifle more distinct and she recognized one as her uncle's. Only a word or two was audible here and there, and she could not connect them with what she missed, but, after a time, she heard him say :

“All falls through unless Williamson gets into touch——”

“He must—should be there now—low water,” said the other man.

Elsie missed Staffer's answer, but by and by she caught : “Andrew Johnstone and the American——”

“Must be stopped—know too much,” said the other. “No scruples—can't hesitate.”

Staffer laughed, and Elsie shuddered at his half-heard voice.

“I don't—a relief—do what you like, but make sure. Better get off soon.”

Elsie shrank down as he got up and the light travelled

along the wall, but the men crossed the floor and she heard a cupboard being opened. They were now near the hall door and she missed what they said, but she had heard enough and must escape before the stranger left by the window.

Stealing out of the greenhouse, she ran back, with her brain busily at work, and making her way through the kitchen found Madge where she had left her. They went up the newel stairs and into Madge's room, where Elsie sat down by the window, which was open. She was stonily calm, and said to Madge in a tense whisper : " They came to the door once. What did you hear ? "

" ' The wreck, ' " said Madge. " ' About three hours — there before high water ! ' It wasn't Staffer's voice. "

Elsie pressed her arm, and, listening eagerly, they heard a stealthy footstep in the passage. Then the handle of Elsie's door shook, as if it had been touched, and there was silence.

They waited for a few minutes while Elsie thought hard. The situation, though still obscure, was getting clearer. Andrew was interfering with something it was necessary that Williamson should do, and Staffer had told his visitor that he could stop him as he liked, but must make sure. There had been something horribly threatening in his laugh as he said he did not hesitate. The other was to do what he had undertaken, about low water, near a wreck.

Then Madge, turning towards the window, asked, " What is that ? "

A faint throbbing came out of the dark. It was some distance off, but Elsie recognized it as a motor running down the valley, though she could not tell whether it was a bicycle or a car.

" It's the man going to Annan, " she said. " Listen, while I explain — " Her conclusions grew clearer and more logical as she put them into words, and she got up resolutely when she had finished.

" We can do nothing more, Dick must help us now. "

Stealing down the passage, she entered his room and shook him gently. He awoke, and she put her hand on his face to check the exclamation she half expected.

"It's Elsie; you mustn't make a noise," she said. "Do you know anything about a wreck?"

"I know where it is," he answered drowsily.

"Andrew's there to-night, isn't he?"

"It's possible," said Dick, lifting himself on his elbow. "Why do you ask?"

She told him what she had overheard and he was silent for a moment, though she knew he was now wide awake. Then he said: "I suppose you see what this means? After all, he is your uncle."

"That mustn't count if Andrew's in danger," she replied, in a strained voice.

"No," he agreed; "I think he runs some risk. There was another time when somebody put out our lamp and we might have had to swim. Well, he must be warned, and the other fellow's got a start. I couldn't get the car out without bringing Staffer down, and Whitney's bicycle is at the Burnfoot. I'll have to take mine."

Elsie noted that he had shown no surprise, which was curious, and that he was very cool. Then she remembered that he had not been looking well for some days.

"It might be enough if you got a fisherman, who knew the place, to go," she suggested. "You could give him a guarded message or a note."

Dick smiled as he answered: "I'll have to take a fisherman, but I'm going. Andrew's a very good sort and I owe him something. Will you give me a kiss, Elsie. You haven't done so since we were kiddies—but I'd like you to."

Elsie stooped and kissed his cheek and he put his hand on hers.

"Thank you, my dear. Now you'll have to go. I must make a start."

She went out, wondering at something in his manner, and five minutes afterwards, Dick crept down the newel

stairs. When he wheeled out his ordinary bicycle, the lamp would not burn and he had no time to look for fresh carbide. It was difficult to keep on the drive, and he feared that Staffer might hear the crash if he ran into the border and fell, but he avoided this, and opened the gate at the lodge without wakening its occupants.

The valley was dark, the road wet, and he could scarcely see the clipped hedgerows. Indeed, at first, he ran on to the grass, but by degrees his eyes got used to the gloom and he let the bicycle go down a long hill. It gave him a good start, but when he came to the bottom, the hill in front was steep, and he knew a stern effort would be needed, as he changed to the low gear. He was distressed and panting hard when he was half-way up, and as he forced the cranks round, the tyres slipped and skidded in the mud. The trees that stretched their bare branches overhead kept the road soft, but it seemed to him that they also shut out the air. He could not breathe in the thick gloom beneath them, and his heart was throbbing painfully.

This was the kind of thing he had been specially warned against, but he could not stop. The wind was light, and, allowing for some loss of time in waking a fisherman and getting his boat away, it would be past low-water when they approached the wreck. Remembering what had happened the night the lamp went out, Dick saw that Andrew's danger would begin when the flood-tide raced across the sands.

The breeze met him in the face when the road turned towards the coast at the summit of the hill. He found it refreshing, but it threatened to increase his labour and the mud got worse as he ran down to the seaboard plain. Light mist thickened the gloom and the bicycle skidded badly when he struck the boggy strip along the half-seen hedgerows. Still he toiled on, while the perspiration dripped from his forehead and he got dizzy. The exertion he was making was not sufficient cause for this, but he had paid for rashly

running upstairs at a Lockerbie hotel a few days ago. Something the doctor had warned him of had happened, and he had not recovered from it yet. For all that, he must reach the lower end of the channel before the tide began to flow. He knew the road well, but could not distinguish where he was, and was half afraid he had taken a wrong turning until a few faint lights shone out ahead. These must mark the outskirts of Annan, and five minutes later he ran down the main street. The houses were dark, and he had some trouble to find the narrow lane that turned off to the waterside. There were no lights here, but the road was paved, and when he passed under a railway bridge tall black buildings rose between him and the river. A sour smell came from the wet mud-banks behind them, and the splash of running water warned him that the tide was falling fast. He must lose no time if he meant to get away before the boats were left aground.

He passed a silent factory and a long, shadowy mill ; a schooner's masts rose out of the gloom, and he was in the open. When the road stopped near a wharf-shed, Dick pushed the bicycle through a gap in a hedge and across a field, until he reached a very muddy lane. He would sooner have left the machine, but time did not permit, and for the next five minutes he jolted furiously among the pools and ruts. Somehow, he saved himself from falling, and jumped down when a dark row of houses, on rising ground, cut against the sky. Throwing the bicycle against a fence, he climbed the hill, breathing hard, while his head swam and he felt the heavy thumping of his heart.

When he knocked at a door, a man came down and took him into a small, plainly-furnished room, where he lighted a lamp. He was a big fellow, with keen blue eyes, and a brown face covered with fine wrinkles.

"Noo ye can tell me what ye want," he said.

Dick gave him a rather inadequate explanation, and the fisherman looked thoughtful.

“Weel,” he said, “I dinna’ understand it at thegither, but it’s enough if ye think Mr. Andrew’s in trouble.” He paused for a moment, as if pondering, and then resumed: “The big shrimp-boat would take us doon faster, but she draws four feet and we’d want a punt to get ashore. I’m thinking we’ll take the whammeler. She’s a smart bit craft and we could pull her if there was need.”

He went out, and Dick heard voices in a room above; then he came back and gave the lad a bundle of black oilskins.

“Pit these on. Ye’ll need them.”

Dick thought this probable, for he was wearing his thin, ordinary clothes.

“I expect so,” he remarked, as he got into the oilskins, which were softer and more pliable than any he had seen in shops. “You see, I left in rather a hurry.”

“Just that,” replied the other. “An’ noo we’ll start.”

His curtness was reassuring, for Dick knew his countrymen. The fellow’s immediate business was to take him to the wreck, and he would fix his mind on doing so. It was obvious that there was something mysterious about their errand, but although the Scot is as curious as other people, he seldom asks unnecessary questions when there is work to be done. His habit is to concentrate upon the main issue.

They left the house, and a few minutes later crept along a slippery plank to a boat lying against a timber framework on which nets were dried. She was sharp at both ends, half-decked, and about twenty feet long, with a short, thick mast. Now the tide had ebbed, the river mouth was about a dozen yards across, and a row of larger craft, sheering to and fro in the eddies, nearly filled the channel. Behind these, a cluster of white buildings and a low promontory loomed out of the dark. On the opposite side, a high gravel bank seemed to close the narrow entrance.

“Lowse the stern-mooring,” said the fisherman, and

there was a harsh rattle of chain as the boat slid out into the stream.

Then he threw an oar into the sculling notch and they drifted away, slipping between the trawl-boats that rose out of the gloom and vanished astern. A minute or two later, the stream boiled noisily along the gravel bank, the white buildings faded, and they were swept into the darkness that brooded over the Firth. The man hoisted a small, black lugsail and jib, and took the tiller as the boat listed gently down to a biting wind.

"Maybe ye'll find it warmer in the for'ad den," he said. "Ye can light the bit stove and set the kettle on."

Dick, who was shivering, crawled through a hatch into a narrow dark hole, where he lay down, after feeling for and lighting the stove. There was no room between floor and deck-beams to sit comfortably, but an old sail and some ropes made a couch on which he was glad to rest. He felt shaky, and an unpleasant faintness threatened to overcome him.

He heard the water splash against the planks and felt the boat list, which was comforting, because he thought it was fourteen miles to the wreck. Still, the ebb would run nearly four miles an hour, there was some wind, and the whammel boats sailed fast. If his companion could keep her off the ground as the banks dried and the channel narrowed, they ought to arrive by low water.

CHAPTER XXX.

WHEN THE TIDE TURNED.

THE wind fell as the tide drained out, and belts of mist hung motionless about the sands when the whammel boat crept slowly down to the mouth of the channel. The sail lay on deck, and Dick panted as he pulled an oar while his companion sculled astern. He felt faint, and the heavily-ballasted boat was hard to move, but he thought the tide was turning and knew

he must hold out. Now and then he turned and looked ahead, but saw nothing except the mist. There were no birds about, the water was smooth, and everything was very quiet. At length, a tall mast grew out of the haze and Dick stopped rowing.

"The *Rowan*. Scull her in to the bank," he said. "I want to see where the dinghy is."

They could not find her, but presently came upon a whammel boat lying near the edge of the sand.

"It's the *Nance* that Tam Grahame selt awa'," the fisherman remarked. "I canna' see what she's doing here with naebody on board."

"We'll pull off to the yacht," Dick replied.

The dinghy was not astern when they boarded the *Rowan*, and after Dick went below and lighted a lamp, his companion looked puzzled.

"It's queer!" he said. "There's seeven feet o' watter, and Mr. Andrew wouldna' swim ashore."

"Not when he had the dinghy."

"But she's no' on the bank."

"I imagine she's out at sea, by now," Dick said, grimly. "How long do you think the *Nance* has been here?"

"Maybe half an hour. Her keel's weel in the ground and the tide doesna' fall much on the last o' the ebb. They're no' expecting to be back until the flood makes, because her anchor's up the bank."

"That's what I thought," said Dick. "Now, my notion is that Andrew may need help and I'd meant to find him, but don't feel well enough. I suppose you can use a gun?"

"We get a shot at a whaup or shellduck whiles. Ye're no' looking weel."

Dick lifted a big 10-bore gun from a rack and searched a locker for cartridges. "Fours," he said, putting down a packet. "I think you'd better have B's. Here they are." The other looked at him curiously as he took the cartridges, which were loaded with large shot, and Dick smiled.

“ You may meet the man who set the punt adrift,” he said. “ I want you to go to the wreck and find my cousin. Tell him to be careful, because one of the gang has come down channel after him. If there’s trouble going on when you get there, do what you think best, but bring Andrew back. The police won’t blame you afterwards if you have to use the gun.”

The man nodded quietly, and Dick knew he suspected something and could be trusted.

“ Ye’ll be for staying here. Will I light the stove ? ”

“ No,” said Dick. “ I imagine it would be safer if I waited in your boat. She’ll be needed when the tide flows, and I can make myself comfortable in the den.”

The other sculled the boat ashore and put out an anchor, after which he went away across the bank, and Dick crept into the forecastle. The stove was burning, and the small, dark place was warm. It had been a strain to hold out until all that was necessary had been done, and now he was glad to lie down among the ropes and sails. There was a weight on his chest, his breathing was hard, and his pulse seemed to be getting sluggish. He wished he had some brandy or there was somebody about, but he must not give in yet. The boat would be needed when Andrew came back and might be tampered with.

In the meanwhile, Andrew and Whitney, who carried guns, had crossed the bank towards the wreck and then separated at a short distance from her. Andrew went straight forward while his comrade made a round so as to approach her from the other side. Hitherto, their visits had led to nothing, but Rankine seemed to think it would be different this time.

When he got near the wreck, Andrew found that the tide had scoured out a pool round her after part, which threatened to make things difficult. His figure would be visible against the pale gleam of the water and he could not get across without splashing. He must go round, but this would take him away from the place where it was easiest to get on board. For all that, he

must not make a noise, and he moved cautiously across the wet sand until he reached the broken timbers on the edge of the pool.

He heard the water trickle through the vessel's seams and the murmur of the languid surf in the distance, but, presently, thought there was something else. The sound seemed to come from inside the wreck, and he moved a few yards nearer and then stopped, with his feet in the pool, listening hard. It was now something like the striking of matches, because there was a curious snap and crackle. Looking up, he fixed his eyes on the masthead and thought it did not end as abruptly as it ought to do. Something was sticking out from it, and Andrew set his lips. A wireless installation was at work and it looked as if he could surprise and seize the operator. He meant to do so, though he realized what the consequences might be.

It was, however, impossible to climb up with the gun in his hand, and he was sorry he had brought it because Whitney had insisted. Leaning it against the wreck, he found a rest for his hand and lifted himself to a stringer. His head and shoulders were now above the top of the vessel's ribs, but he did not see how he was to reach the deck, which had fallen in abreast of where he was, and while he looked about there was a sharp report behind him and a tremor in the wood. It had been struck by a bullet a few inches from his side, and letting go, he fell back with a splash.

Andrew was afterwards uncertain whether he lost his hold in alarm or dropped back with instinctive caution. He came down in the water, and did not get up, because a dark figure stood on the other side of the pool and he feared that a movement would draw a bullet. His gun was some yards away, and it looked as if the fellow could shoot. Andrew, however, thought he would be nearly invisible against the side of the wreck so long as he kept still, and the shot would bring Whitney to his help.

Then there was a shout from the deck, and Andrew

recognised Williamson's voice. He was obviously alarmed, but the other man, who called out sharply in German, seemed to order him back. Andrew imagined from this that the messages he was transmitting were of urgent importance, or, perhaps the newcomer had another to send. It was, however, plain that the men must not be allowed to finish their work, and he wondered whether he could creep back to where his gun lay while the fellow's attention was diverted. He was getting up cautiously when the stranger's pistol flashed and a spirt of water splashed into his face. Then there was a streak of light and a heavier report farther back upon the sands, and his antagonist turned and ran a few yards.

Andrew knew Whitney could not have fired the shot, but this did not matter. He must get his gun while the other was occupied, and as he felt for it he heard Whitney run round the stern of the wreck. He was safe now, but the crackling sound had begun again, and Williamson must be stopped ; besides, Andrew had a signal of his own to make. Leaving the gun, he climbed up a timber and had just reached the deck when an indistinct figure rushed across it and vanished over the broken bulwarks on the opposite side. Then a patter of feet on the sand indicated that Williamson was making off.

For all that, Andrew stopped, and dragging a tin from his pocket put it on the rail and struck a match. As he dropped it into the tin a bright blaze sprang up, and jumping down to the sand, he seized his gun. The fellow who had shot at him had disappeared and there was nobody in sight, but he could hear men running on the other side of the wreck. Then Whitney's voice came out of the darkness, telling him to follow.

As he splashed through the water around the vessel's stern he saw two figures on the sand. He supposed one was Whitney and the other was evidently a friend. Making an effort, he caught them up, and Whitney, who was nearest him, began to talk in breathless gasps.

“That’s an Annan man—Dick sent him. Think coastguards will see your flare?”

“Where’s Williamson and the other?” Andrew asked.

“Close ahead. Imagine they were going back to the channel, but couldn’t get past us. What about the tide?”

Andrew began to understand the situation. While he was trying to surprise Williamson, his assailant had quietly come up behind him, and the latter had been followed by the man Dick had sent. The fisherman had prevented the other’s turning back while Whitney followed Williamson, and the fugitives must now make for the Scotch shore, or risk being shot at if they tried to go round his party’s flank. In order to prevent this, he must extend his line.

“Spread out,” he said. “Tide’s flowing now, and the water will be in the gut when we get there.”

Whitney and the other man moved off left and right, and Andrew, glancing round, saw that his flare was burning. The men they followed could not see it because they faced the other way, and although there was some mist, he thought the signal would warn the coast-patrol, whom Rankine had told to keep a good look-out. They ran on, splashing across wet sand and into pools. Sometimes they caught a glimpse of two figures ahead and sometimes lost them in the haze. It was hard to tell whether they were gaining or not, and Andrew could not take his long boots off. The Annan man, who seemed to be hampered by his oil-skins, was falling back, but Whitney was running well and drawing in front. In the meanwhile, Andrew heard the splash of feet before him, and in the distance the sound of the advancing tide.

The latter grew steadily louder, and a breeze was getting up. As they came out of a belt of mist a streak of water glimmered among the sands, and beyond it a black hillside rose from the dusky beach. It looked as if the fugitives, who were plainer now, could

not escape, but they held on steadily, and Andrew wondered what depth there was in the gutter. Glancing to one side, he thought he saw something moving along the edge of the channel, but could not be sure because there was mist about the spot. He could not stop to get a better view since he meant to follow Williamson.

Some minutes later he saw the men in front stop at the edge of the water, and wondered why they did so. The channel was rapidly widening and they must cross at once or surrender. Instead, they ran along the bank for some distance and stopped again, and Andrew now saw that a white boat was moving along the opposite side. Changing his course, he ran on, panting hard, and saw that the other two were waiting. A few moments later, one plunged into the channel while his comrade stood still.

As the boat was some distance off, it looked as if the man in the water might escape. Then, as Andrew got near the other, there were two or three quick, bright flashes, and he heard a bullet pass his head and saw the sand spirt up at Whitney's feet. The fellow meant to stop them while his partner got a start, or perhaps imagined that the water was too deep to cross.

Whitney stopped. A puff of smoke blew about him and there was a heavy report. The man on the bank staggered, fired his pistol again, and splashed awkwardly into the water. A moment later Andrew plunged in. He was close to the other now, but had dropped his gun, because he did not mean to shoot. The man turned and raised his pistol, but his arm fell back, and Andrew sprang upon him.

They went down, and the stream, which was running fast, boiled about them, but Andrew held on, and getting up saw Whitney at his side. They dragged out their prisoner, who made no resistance.

"My arm!" he said breathlessly. "There is also some shot in my leg."

"Where's your pistol?" Andrew asked.

"In the sea."

"Well," said Whitney as the fisherman joined them, "I wish I knew what we ought to do with him. We can't stop here."

This was obvious, because the tide was already flowing past their feet, but looking round at a hail, they saw the boat pulling slowly towards them against the stream. She struck the sand and a man in uniform jumped out.

"I see you have got one of them," he remarked. "Do you know him?"

"I never saw him before," said Andrew. "Where's the other?"

"Gone down, I think. We saw him trying to swim, but the tide swept him up the gut, and when we were getting close he disappeared. We pulled round the spot, but saw nothing. No doubt, he'd have oilskins and sea-boots on."

"Well, this fellow's hurt. Will you take him?"

The coastguard officer nodded. "Certainly. You'd better come with us. I expect you're Mr. Johnstone. We were told to look out for you and launched our gig when we saw your flare."

Andrew said he must get back to his boat and would have barely time enough, and after a hurried account of the affair, set off across the sands with his companions. Though they lost sight of the water presently, they made the best pace they could, and the Annan man, whom Andrew recognized, related Dick's attempt to join him.

"It's as weel Mr. Johnstone stayed behind," he concluded. "I'm thinking it was the fellow ye caught who set your dinghy adrift and he'd maybe have a mate hanging roon the *Nance*."

When they came down to the channel, the tide was rising fast and the *Nance* had gone. The other boat was floating, but was held by the anchor her owner had carried up the bank. There was no answer to their hail and Andrew plunged into the water.

"Mr. Johnstone's nae doot in the den. He wasna' looking weel," said the fisherman.

Andrew was on board in a few moments, and as he looked into the forecastle while the others pulled the boat ashore, it was with relief he heard Dick ask : "Got back all right, old man ? "

"Yes ; we owe that to you."

"I'm glad," said Dick. "You might help me out ; I'm not sure I could get through the hatch."

Andrew noted that his voice was faint and strained, and got a shock as he saw how helpless the lad was when with some trouble they lifted him through the narrow scuttle and put him down on the floorings.

"Don't talk any more," he said, and turned to the fisherman. "Scull her off to the yacht as fast as possible."

They were alongside in a few minutes and, after lighting the lamps, laid Dick on a locker in the cabin.

"Give me some whisky," he said. "I think I'm pretty bad."

"We'll soon run up the Firth and put you in a doctor's hands," Andrew replied, as he held a glass to his lips.

Dick drained it, after which he was silent for a minute or two. Then he said : "Don't be in a hurry ; there's something to talk about. You see, I'm not sure I'll get over this."

"Rot !" said Andrew, gruffly, trying to hide his alarm. "You've been as bad before."

"No ; not quite. But wait——"

Dick closed his eyes and Andrew saw his fears reflected in Whitney's look. Dick's face was chalky-white and haggard, and they noted his laboured breathing. The tide splashed against the yacht's planks, the halyards had begun to tap against the mast, and there was a sharp rattle of blocks as the fisherman hoisted sail. They let him go and sat watching Dick from the opposite locker. Presently the lad looked up.

"Think I can talk a bit. You'll have Appleyard, Andrew, if I don't get well, and there's nothing to be said about that, because you'll look after it much better

than I should have done. Still, you'll keep the old hands until you can pension them, and there's Bob, my old pony ; I wouldn't like him sold."

"You're taking too much for granted, Dick," Andrew replied. "You knocked yourself out in hurrying down here to warn me, but you'll be fit again in a few days."

"I know you hope so. It's possible, too ; but we'll get things straightened up. Of course, Appleyard is Mrs. Woodhouse's home ; she's not responsible for her brother, you know. Elsie will keep everything right unless she marries." Dick paused and looked at Andrew with a feeble smile. "She may, by and by."

Andrew turned his head, and after a minute, Dick resumed : "I'd like my debts paid off, but the estate must not be robbed. If you open my desk, you'll find an old pocket-book. It will show you what I actually got. Pin them down to that. Now give me a little more whisky."

Whitney did so, and Dick, who rested for a time, went on again : "You see, I did get their money, though not all the notes called for, and they'll have some trouble about the insurance."

"Ah !" said Andrew. "How's that ? But you'd better not bother about it now."

"I mayn't be able to bother later," Dick rejoined, with a smile. "When I got the doctor's warning I was very hard up, so I went to the insurance people and asked how much they'd let me have if I surrendered the policy. Well, though they asked a lot of questions, we didn't come to terms. It seemed the other fellows were entitled to benefit, but something wasn't straight and my notion is that the office will dispute their claim. I felt amused about it now and then ; but they mustn't lose what they really lent."

"I'll see to it," said Andrew. "Now, you'll lie quiet and Whitney will look after you while I take her up the Firth, because a doctor must see you as soon as possible. I daresay it will help things if you can go to sleep."

He went on deck, and after weighing anchor and

making sail, sat at the helm, lost in disturbing thought, while the *Rowan* stood up channel. He was anxious about Dick, but this was not the only matter that troubled him.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE NET.

IT was a calm, dark night and the trawler's engines ran at half speed as she closed with the land.

The badge of a British steam-fishing company was painted on her funnel, and a correct registration number appeared in bold, white figures on her bows, but she carried no lights and her crew were not Englishmen. Ahead, formless black hillsides faded into the gloom, but the skipper, who was provided with the latest Admiralty chart, knew his bearings and the leadsman had found the depth of water he expected.

A plume of vapour trailed away from her escape-pipe, for, as she moved slowly shorewards with the flood, the engines could not take all the steam it was prudent to raise. After a time, a light twinkled upon the unseen beach, went out, and shone again, and the skipper, who ordered another cast of the lead, made a quick calculation. The tide would rise for an hour yet and there was already two feet more water than his vessel drew in the channel he must enter. Then the look-out reported a buoy ahead, and he rang his telegraph for more speed. He was in the channel and another buoy farther on would warn him of the only dangerous bend. He was anxious to pick up his cargo and get to sea again.

Moving shorewards faster, the vessel faded into the gloom of the land, but the beat of engines and splash of displaced water travel far on a calm night, and men with keen ears were listening for these sounds on board a powerful steam-launch two miles away. She travelled at a moderate speed, towing a big, white gig filled with coastguards, but her crew were naval men.

A smart young lieutenant held the wheel, trying to remember the soundings, bearings, and courses he had been carefully instructed in. They were hard to check, particularly as the flood tide swept him along, but he was glad to remember that three feet of water was enough for him.

By and by he stopped the engine and listened. At first, he could only hear the ripple of the tide across some hidden shoal and the wash of the languid swell upon the invisible beach, but, after a time, a measured thud came out of the distance. He knew it was the beat of a steamer's screw.

"Between us and the land, I think," he remarked.

"Yes, sir; about two miles off," agreed the petty officer he addressed.

"Then she must be going up the gutter, because there's not a fathom on the banks. We'll go ahead; there's enough water anywhere for us."

The launch swung round on a different course when her engines began to clank, and a man sounded, now and then, as they ran for the shoals. The lieutenant hardly expected to follow the channel; his object was to keep within hearing of the other vessel, and, if he was lucky, his work would be finished before the tide ebbed much. By and by a sharp, pulsatory roar came out of the dark.

"Looks as if she was on the ground and carrying plenty steam," he said, when he had ordered the engines to be stopped. "As they'll, no doubt, back her off, we'll wait and give them time to ship their cargo."

For the next few minutes the crews of launch and gig listened eagerly. They knew that when the vessel ran aground the steam her stopped engines could not use had blown off. The roar died away, as was to be expected, when the machinery was restarted, hard-astern, but now the immobility of the stranded craft increased the resistance, the thud of the screw was louder. Presently, it changed to a steady beat that drew away from them, and they knew she had got afloat and was steaming up channel.

“ Easy all, for half an hour,” said the lieutenant, who looked at his watch.

The boats lay close together, rolling gently on the languid swell, while the men sat in relaxed attitudes and talked in low voices. Still, there was a feeling of suppressed excitement and it was a relief when their officer grasped the wheel.

“ Let her go at half speed,” he ordered.

The tow rope tightened as the gig swung into line astern, and they moved steadily towards the land for some time. Then they heard a roar of steam again, louder than before and continuous, and the lieutenant signed to the engineer :

“ Full speed,” he said. “ I think we have her now.”

The water hissed along the planks, the gig lifted her bows on a surging wave, and the wash of the screw ran far astern. By and by a blurred object grew out of the darkness in front of them, and the officer called to the coastguards: “ Cast off and get to your work ! Burn a flare if you want us.”

A rope fell into the water, the engines stopped, and there was a rattle of oars as the gig drove by. They fell with a simultaneous splash, and their regular thud receded as she went up channel while the launch’s crew waited.

In two or three minutes the sound stopped. There were alarmed shouts and hoarse orders, while the roar of steam continued ; then, after a time, the beat of oars began again. The boat came back slowly, with two men pulling, and ran alongside the launch.

“ You don’t seem to have had much trouble,” the lieutenant remarked.

“ We hadn’t, sir,” said a coastguard officer. “ They were busy and didn’t hear us until we’d got our boat-hook on her rail. Only one of them drew a pistol and he was knocked down. We’ll land them and leave a guard on board when she’s moored.”

“ Very well, if we can’t take her to Barrow this tide ? ”

The coastguard laughed. “ So far as I could see,

there's a big piece of flounder-net wrapped round her propeller and trailing about her aft. It has an unusually thick head-rope, and some lengths of iron pipe are jambed between the blades and rudder. The fellow who set the net made a good job. We'll have trouble in cutting it loose when she dries."

"Did you find much oil?"

"About a boat-load of heavy drums, which had just been thrown on deck. We got the boat and I expect our fellows ashore have seized another lot. However, here are your two men. I don't think you'll do much with the skipper, but the other seems less obstinate."

Two handcuffed men were put on board and the boat dropped back as the launch leaped ahead. The water rose about her bows in a white, curling wave, her stern sank down in a hollow ridged with foam, and she shook with the fierce throb of hard-driven machinery. Dark hills slid past to starboard, bold cliffs that stood out from their dim background rolled by, and after a time a flash from a lantern was answered by a gleam of light ahead. Then the burred outline of a steamer grew into distinct form. In another minute or two the launch was alongside and the winches strained and clanked as she was hoisted in.

"Everything went as we expected, and I've brought you the two prisoners," the lieutenant reported to Rankine, who sat in his room before a big chart.

"Send them in, one at a time," said the latter. "Clear the guns and get under way. The course is west by south."

He spent some time examining his prisoners. One, for the most part, preserved an obstinate silence, but when he had been taken away, the other seemed to see the force of Rankine's arguments. Afterwards, the latter went up to the bridge and changed the course a few points.

"The fellow speaks English fairly and bears out what we have been told," he said to the young officer on watch. "I rather think he'll deal straight with us

in order to save his skin. Anyhow, he has given me their supply-boat signal. The craft we're after is the latest and biggest thing of her kind."

"We ought to bag her," the other answered, thoughtfully. "I've got the searchlight rigged, and Wilson's the best shot we had in the battleship. Still, the little guns are awkwardly mounted and we haven't a clear field of fire."

"It won't need more than one shot," said Rankine. "A perforated submarine isn't much use under water and the game's ours if she stays on top. I'll give you the call-up signal and you can get things ready."

An hour later, he pressed a button and the engines stopped. The clang of a steamer's bridge-telegraph can be heard some distance off, and Rankine had substituted an electric signal. Having undertaken a dangerous piece of work, he had carefully made his plans and did not mean to announce his movements to the enemy. Two guns had been put on board the vessel, but as it was thought advisable to conceal them and the deckhouse and masts were in the way, their fire only commanded a limited strip of horizon. Leaning on the rails, Rankine searched the water with his night-glasses.

The coast was out of sight, mist drifted across the sea, and the night was dark. On the whole, this was an advantage, since it would prevent his antagonist, who was expecting a trawler, from noticing the vessel's size and rig until they were close together. There was some swell, though the surface of the water was smooth, and the vessel rolled languidly. A feather of steam eddied about her funnel, and there was a soft splashing as her slanted side sank into the sea. No gleam of light pierced the darkness, everything was still, and, although he was cool, Rankine felt his nerves tingle.

He gave an order and one of the prisoners was brought to the bridge, after which the steamer slowly moved ahead and a petty officer, standing behind

a canvas wind-screen, alternately held up and lowered red and green pyrotechnic flares. The streams of coloured light showed shadowy figures waiting motionless at their stations and drove a radiant track across the water. Then they died away, and men, whose eyes had been held by the glitter, felt relief. Now they could see about the ship, and they knew watchfulness was needed.

For five minutes nothing happened, and Rankine, who was sensible of keen tension, began to wonder whether he should signal again. It was possible that he had overshot or fallen short of his distance. Then there was a sharp hail from a look-out and he saw the sea break not far ahead. A confused white ripple spread away from something that moved amidst it, and drew out in a long, wavering line. A lantern flashed between regular intervals of darkness, and presently a low, black object grew out of the advancing foam. Rankine pressed the button and the throb of engines slackened, after which he gave an order to his prisoner.

The man hailed in German, the submarine swerved and slowed, and the two vessels drew abreast and, perhaps, fifty yards apart, while Rankine's quarter boat swung out from the davits.

"Tell them to jump into the water and I'll pick them up," he ordered the prisoner.

As the man called out, a dazzling beam from the searchlight played upon the submarine's hull and her wet steel skin glittered like silver. Next moment there was another flash, streaked with a vein of red, and a cloud of thin, acrid smoke whirled up. The steamer quivered with the heavy concussion; the submarine reeled and listed over. Indistinct figures plunged into the foam that lapped about her side; and then the bright beam showed an empty stretch of seething water. Rankine was watching his boat, which moved into the lighted track on her work of rescue, when a look-out shouted a hoarse warning.

Swinging round, Rankine saw a feathery streak of foam on the opposite side of the vessel. It was heading towards her at tremendous speed, and he knew the wash of a torpedo.

“Starboard, hard!” he called to the helmsman, and set his lips as he pressed the button for full speed.

Two submarines had answered his signal, instead of one, and the last had crept up to attack him while he was sinking her consort. The steamer, however, answered her helm, slowly, but enough. The swift white streak drove past her stern with a few feet to spare, and she began to shake as her engines quickened.

“Port!” he said, in a harsh voice. “Steady that!”

A flash blazed out of the darkness, a panel of the wheelhouse was shattered, and the canvas bridge-screen fell apart in rags, but Rankine, who was untouched, had seen a long, dark shape on the water close ahead. It might vanish in a moment, before his guns could be swung and trained. Indeed, he doubted if the object was within their circumscribed field of fire, and meant to use a surer means. One end of the black hull tilted up and the other began to sink. His enemy was going under, but he thought she would not be quite quick enough. The steamer’s sharp steel stem was only a dozen yards away, and shouting an order to the crew, he gripped the bridge-rails hard.

The water ahead boiled and rose in a tumbling ridge; then there was a heavy shock, and the steamer trembled violently. One could feel her forge through something that crumpled up beneath her bows, but the jarring and grinding passed aft, and she leaped forward when she passed over the obstacle. Rankine saw a curious disturbance down the screw-torn wake, but it subsided and he stopped the engines.

“Sound the forward well! Swing your light aft and lower the gig!” he said.

The stream of radiance flashed astern and spread about the vessel, but there was nothing on the water

except the boat, which made towards them. Then a man came up to report that the well was nearly dry.

"She's a strong old ship," Rankine remarked, and turned to another man: "Where's that prisoner, Evans?"

"I haven't seen him, sir, since the torpedo missed us."

"Ask on deck," said Rankine. "Why isn't the gig away?"

As the man went down the ladder, a splash of oars began, and the searchlight's moving beam swept the sea. It picked out the larger boat and then passed on, leaving black darkness, and followed the gig. Ten minutes later, the boats returned and Rankine received the young lieutenant in his cabin.

"We have got six men; all from the first craft, so far as we can make out," the lieutenant reported, with rather strained quietness.

"Then the rest have gone," Rankine answered. "We have lost one prisoner, too. It's pretty obvious that he jumped over. Must have known there were two submarines and expected the last to sink us."

"He was not in the boats," the lieutenant said, meaningly. "Do you want to see the men we picked up?"

"Not just yet. Let them have dry clothes and anything else they need," Rankine answered, and after a moment's silence resumed: "I wish we'd got some of the others, and don't know that one ought to think they deserved their fate; but, after all, when one remembers the torpedoed merchant ships—— However, we'd better land them in Loch Ryan. Let her go west by north until you make the Mull of Galloway light."

The lieutenant went out, and Rankine, lying back on the locker, lighted his pipe. It was his first battle, and he wanted to recover his normal calm. He had won, but did not quite feel the exhilarating flush of victory he had expected. Instead, he rather shrank from dwelling upon the fight.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ANDREW LEARNS THE TRUTH.

ELSIE, lying half awake, raised herself on her pillow as she heard a clock strike, and the anxiety she had half forgotten returned with double force. Although she had not been quite asleep, she had lost count of the time, and it was now nearly three hours after low-water. The danger that had threatened Andrew must be past, but she did not know how long she must wait for news of him. Besides, some mischance might have befallen Dick. He had looked ill when she sent him on an errand that would severely try his strength.

By and by she heard a sharp throbbing coming up the valley. It sounded like a motor-bicycle and she got out of bed and began to dress, wondering whether Dick, who might have borrowed the machine at Annan, was returning. The sound got louder; the bicycle had passed the lodge and was nearing the house, and Elsie quietly entered Madge's room.

"I heard it," Madge said. "I haven't been asleep. Shall I get up?"

"No," said Elsie, and touched her in warning as a door opened.

There were steps in the passage, and they waited until the sound died away, when Madge asked: "Are you going down?"

"Yes," said Elsie. "I feel I must; but it might be better if you didn't come."

She heard the hall door open as she descended the stairs, but she went on and waited at the bottom. The bicycle had stopped and she thought it significant that its driver had boldly ridden up to the house. If Dick had done so, he would have come in, but nobody had entered and Staffer had gone out. After a few minutes, she heard the sliding door of the motor-house run back. The small wheels it rolled on grated upon the iron carrier, and Elsie knew the sound.

Then the motor-bicycle sped away noisily down the drive, and soon afterwards Staffer came in carrying a lantern. He did not see Elsie as he put the light on a table and locked a travelling bag. She thought it curious that the bag was ready packed, and since he had taken no precautions against being heard, it looked as if speed was more important than secrecy. The message that had been brought him must deal with some urgent matter. Still, Dick had not come back and she was horribly anxious. She could not wait to learn what had happened at the wreck, and, as she moved forward to speak to Staffer, he looked up. His expression was tense, but she thought he was calm.

"Ah!" he said. "So you have spied on me again!"

"Where's Dick?" Elsie asked quietly, though her heart beat fast.

"Dick?" said Staffer. "Now I begin to understand! You sent him down the Firth?"

"I did; but where is he?"

"On board Andrew's yacht, I imagine."

Elsie was sensible of keen satisfaction, but only part of her fears were set at rest.

"And Andrew? Is he on the yacht?"

Staffer looked hard at her. She was trembling with excitement and cold, but she did not flinch, and he surprised her by a curious bitter laugh. It carried a hint of understanding that brought the blood to her face.

"I don't know where he is, but there's reason to think he has come to no harm. That ought to satisfy you."

Elsie was silent. Her relief was great, but now Andrew was safe, her mind could fix itself on other matters. Staffer had guessed her secret and knew that she had spoiled his plans, but his manner was rather ironical than revengeful. For all that, it disturbed and frightened her. She thought something that had hit him hard had happened, and his cold-blooded calm was daunting.

"Well," he resumed, "there's a touch of grim humour in the situation. I found you a home and gave you the

advantages you enjoy, and now you have baffled me and ruined the work of cleverer brains than mine. It's humiliating to see one's schemes brought to nothing by a raw girl's devotion to her stupid lover."

Elsie's face burned, but she said: "There were other reasons for my turning against you, and Andrew is cleverer than you think."

"So it seems," Staffer rejoined. "Anyhow, he has beaten me and you had better marry him when he asks you. I suppose I ought to rage, and it wouldn't be unnatural if I tried to do you some bodily harm, but that would serve no purpose and doesn't seem worth while."

Although she knew they could never be friends again, Elsie was sensible of a certain admiration for the man. His judgment and self-control were greater than she had imagined, and she admitted that he had treated her well. She thought she would have been in some danger had she now stood in his way, but he was, in a sense, too big to console himself with fruitless revenge.

"I'm sorry the course of things made us enemies. It was unavoidable," she said.

Staffer made an impatient sign. "I'm going away and it's very doubtful if I'll return, but since nobody else seems to have heard me, I'd sooner you didn't mention the matter until breakfast to-morrow. Then you can say I've gone to Edinburgh. Perhaps you can promise that."

"Yes. Don't you want to see mother before you go?"

"No," said Staffer, thoughtfully, "it might be better if I didn't, and, on the whole, I imagine she won't be much surprised."

He broke off as the car came throbbing to the door, and Elsie said: "After all that's happened, I can wish you well now."

"I need good wishes," he answered grimly, picking up his bag, but she followed him across the hall.

"If things had only been different," she said, "we might have been friends——"

Staffer did not seem to hear, for he jumped into the car, which rolled away, and when she had shut the door Elsie went slowly upstairs. She felt limp and bewildered now the strain had gone; the one thing she realized clearly was that Andrew was safe. Madge, who had lighted a candle, turned to her eagerly as she entered her room, but Elsie did not stop.

"They are all right, but I can't talk about it now," she said, and passing on shut the door.

Soon after Staffer left Appleyard, Andrew picked his way towards the burnfoot, across a boggy heath. He had landed about an hour earlier and gone to a farm he knew, where he had asked for a horse and trap and sent a man to Annan for a doctor. Now he was coming back as fast as possible, because he felt anxious about Dick, but caution was needed, since deep drains crossed the heath. The mist had closed in again, and, as he stopped at the last drain to look for a narrow spot, he heard the languid splash of the surf and the wild cry of a black-backed gull. The harsh sound disturbed him, and jumping the drain where he stood, he went on as fast as he could. The splash of the sea got louder, and by and by he saw an indistinct figure waiting near the water's edge. Andrew was used to the sands at night, but the motionless dark form seemed to strike a deeper note of desolation. His steps slackened as he approached it.

"Is that you, Jim?" he called.

Whitney waited until he came up, and then put his hand on his arm.

"I'm afraid you've gotten to brace yourself against a shock," he said.

"Ah!" said Andrew. "You mean, Dick's worse?"

Whitney pressed his arm, sympathetically. "He's dead."

There was silence for the next minute, except for the mournful murmur of the sea; and then Whitney resumed: "It wasn't long after you went ashore. He

looked up and beckoned me to sit on the locker by his cot. "Tell Andrew I'm glad he'll have Appleyard," he said."

Whitney paused for a moment. "He lay still afterwards, and I thought he'd gone to sleep. By and by the cabin seemed to be strangely quiet, and when I got up to look at him I saw that he was dead."

"The hurried trip down channel killed him, and he made it for my sake," Andrew said, in a tense, hoarse voice.

"You mustn't take that for granted, but he certainly wouldn't grudge the risk. He might have died at any time from some trifling exertion."

Andrew indicated the dinghy, in which he had rowed off from the yacht alone. "How did you get ashore?"

"The bank's steep and I sheered her in until I could jump from the bowsprit end. I didn't want you to come on board without knowing."

"Thanks," said Andrew. "I'm going off to her, now. Try to get into Marshall's bothy and make a fire. We'll have to wait some time for the doctor."

He launched the dinghy, and when he returned Whitney had lighted a few sticks and peats in the fisherman's sod hut. Andrew's face was grave as he sat down on an empty box.

"If you don't mind, I'd sooner not talk," he said. "I was fond of Dick."

He let Whitney row the doctor off when the latter arrived, and day was breaking when they reached Annan. An hour later, Andrew, who now felt limp and cold, got down from a trap at Appleyard and walked stiffly into the hall. Elsie came to meet him with a glow in her eyes, but stopped abruptly when she saw his tired face.

"I'm glad you're back," she said. "But what's the matter?"

He looked at her compassionately and she gasped.

"Oh!" she said. "Is Dick——?"

There was nobody else about, and putting his arm

round her he led her to an oak bench near the big fireplace and sat down by her side.

"Dick's dead," he answered quietly. "On board the *Rowan*. Heart failure, the doctor thinks."

"I sent him, when I knew he was ill," she cried in distress.

"You didn't know it would do him much harm, dear."

"But I did," Elsie moaned, with a shiver, turning her head.

Andrew was puzzled, but he answered soothingly: "I know what you feel, because I felt it, too—Dick might have got better and lived a long time if he hadn't gone down channel to warn me. In fact, I spoke to the doctor about it, but he didn't altogether take this view."

"He didn't want you to blame yourself."

"No; I don't think that was it. But it's a blow to us both, and the worst is I can do nothing to soften it for you."

"You loved him," she said, with a look of pain. "You came home from Canada and fought Williamson for his sake. I was often harsh and impatient with him, and he always bore it well. He was generous and forgiving—and we know he was brave. He must have known the risk he ran—but he didn't hesitate. I knew it—and I sent him——"

Her voice trailed off and she broke into stormy sobbing, while Andrew, putting his arm round her, awkwardly tried to comfort her. His touch seemed to have a soothing influence, for Elsie got calm, and by and by drew away from him with some colour in her tearful face.

"You were always a help, Andrew; one turns to you in trouble," she said. "But I mustn't give way like this."

She left him, and Andrew went up to Whitney's room, where the latter was changing his clothes.

"I expect Miss Woodhouse feels the thing keenly," Whitney remarked.

"She does," Andrew agreed. "In fact, she feels much as I do, in spite of what the doctor said. If Dick hadn't gone to our rescue, he'd have been with us yet. Still, I don't quite understand——"

He stopped with a puzzled look, and Whitney suggested: "You don't see why she let him go, when she thought it might be dangerous?"

"Yes," said Andrew, with some hesitation, "that's what bothers me."

Whitney gave him a keen glance. "Well, she may have thought there were two lives that could be saved against one that must be risked. It would be desperately hard for a young girl to face the responsibility of deciding right, and, although Miss Woodhouse has plenty of grit, I reckon she feels the strain. No doubt, she's rather overcome by the consequences of the line she took, but when she gets calmer she'll see that she can't blame herself."

"I'm afraid she may blame herself always," said Andrew, who hesitated for a moment. "Leaving you out of the matter, I feel that I'm not worth it."

Whitney saw that Andrew had no suspicion of the truth yet, but it was not his business to enlighten him.

"No," he said, "I think you're wrong. Miss Woodhouse is bound to realize that she did the only possible thing. But you had better change your clothes and get some breakfast. I expect you'll have a busy day."

It was a relief to Andrew to find his time occupied, but at noon he was surprised by a request for an interview by a man he did not know. The stranger, whom Dick had once met at an Edinburgh hotel, was shown into the library and gave Andrew a letter.

"I expect my card would convey nothing to you, but here are my credentials," he said.

Andrew put down the letter, which was from the

Home Secretary's office and countersigned by an eminent military authority.

"Well," he said, "I'm at your command. What is it you want to know?"

"Perhaps I'd better state that my visit is made in a friendly spirit. We recognize the patriotic line you and your cousin, whose death I was sorry to hear of, have taken. I met him once, and, it's rather curious, that he invited me to Appleyard."

"Ah!" said Andrew. "I never thought that Dick——"

"Shared your suspicions?" the other suggested. "I can't tell how far his went, but he may have known more than you imagine. He certainly once did us an important service; but we'll let that go. Did Mr. Staffer offer any explanation for leaving here early this morning?"

"He said he was going to Edinburgh; that was all."

"Well, he got to Hawick, where we lost trace of him, but I think it's impossible that he went farther north. Have you any ground for suspecting who brought him the warning?"

"None," said Andrew, shortly.

The other nodded. "I'm glad I can take your word. Now I must ask you to tell me about your recent adventures on the sands. You see, I'm in touch with Lieutenant Rankine and the coastguards."

Andrew thought the last was a plain hint, but he guardedly related what had happened, and his companion looked satisfied.

"You don't seem to know that Williamson's body was washed up on the Colvend shore, a few hours since."

"I didn't know," Andrew said, and the other smiled.

"I guess what you feel about it. The man who could perhaps have told us most has gone."

"Well," said Andrew, dryly, "there are reasons why I can't regret that he didn't fall into your hands, particularly since he can do no harm now."

"And you would bear the news of Staffer's escape philosophically?"

"That's true," Andrew owned. "Still, I wouldn't help him in any way. Now you had better make Appleyard your headquarters while you're looking into things. We have nothing to hide."

"Thanks," said the other, "I'll be glad to do so. It may be some satisfaction for you to learn that no unnecessary publicity will be allowed to attend this matter."

Next day, he told Andrew that Staffer's car had been found on the roadside, near a small fishing village on the Northumberland coast.

"He doubled back into England by Norham," he added. "When our men got upon his track they found he'd covered the distances between the points at which they heard of him extraordinarily fast. In consequence, he'd a number of hours start when he left the car, and as a fishing boat sailed soon afterwards I imagine he got away across the North Sea."

"Then I won't complain if his friends on the other side keep him there for good," Andrew replied.

Dick was buried two days later, in a lonely kirkyard where many of his race had been laid to rest. The kirk had long crumbled down except for one tottering arch, but, as usual in the country, the funeral service was held at Appleyard, and Andrew's heart stirred as he saw the long stream of mourners coming up the drive. Dick had not died unlamented, but even those who knew him best were astonished at the number of his friends. None of his tenantry was missing, his neighbours had come from far and near, but there were others; fishermen, shepherds, men who lived by horse-couping and other devious means, and innkeepers from Dumfries and Lockerbie. The respectability of some was doubtful, but their grief was obvious, so far as the Scottish character allowed it to be seen, and Andrew gave them all his thanks and hand. This was

an ancient custom and he was now the head of the family, but as he looked at the rows of solemn faces, he wondered whether he could win the love his predecessor had done.

Rankine came among the rest, and as the long procession moved slowly down the drive, Whitney remarked to him :

“ It isn’t their landlord they’re showing this respect. They’re hard on the outside, these back-country Scots, but I guess they stand by the man they trust.”

“ Ay,” said a big, brown-faced fellow, walking close by, “ we dinna forget.”

When the others had gone to bed that night, Andrew, who was very tired, sat talking to Rankine by the fire in the hall.

“ Has the fellow we caught on the sands made any admissions ? ” he asked. “ I understand you have seen him.”

“ None, before the coastguards handed him to the military officers. He declined to talk, and, if I’m a judge of character, it’s the line he’ll stick to until the end. He sees that he has no defence. I’m rather curious about his rank, because he hesitated over his name, and I imagine he left out the Von ; but he’s obviously a naval man.”

“ He’ll be court-martialled ? ”

“ Yes,” said Rankine. “ It will be kept quiet for one or two reasons, and I don’t think you’ll be wanted.”

“ That’s a relief. What’s your private opinion about the matter ? Was the plot confined to supplying the submarines ? ”

Rankine lighted a cigarette before he answered : “ On the whole, I don’t think so. In fact, it’s possible there was some foundation for your theory about the Eskdale road.”

“ Then you know something ? ”

“ Something,” Rankine agreed, with a smile. “ Now my business on the coast is finished and I’m going to join a battleship, I may perhaps tell you that my rank

is not lieutenant, and to a certain extent, I'm in the confidence of more important men. This is what I know—our sea-planes discovered signs of activity at Cuxhaven and on the Elbe, and a strong fleet of fast cruisers stole out in a fog, not long ago. Luckily, our ships were ready for them and they went back without our being able to engage them. This is to go no further, but we may learn what the movement meant when the war is finished."

"Well," said Andrew, "now you are here, I hope you can spare us a few days."

"Thanks," said Rankine, "I'll be very glad. My new ship needs some refitting and they don't want me at Portsmouth yet."

Andrew imagined that his willingness to remain was accounted for by Madge Whitney's being at Appleyard, but Rankine left at the week-end, promising to return when he could, and the next three or four months passed uneventfully. For the most part, Andrew was kept occupied, investigating Dick's affairs and making new arrangements for the improvement of the estate. It was a relief to be busy, because his loss still weighed on him and he had another trouble. He was getting deeper in love with Elsie, who, he thought, rather kept out of his way. When they met she was friendly, but he noticed a hint of reserve in her manner. He began to think he had better go away for a time when he had put everything straight.

Then, one cold spring evening, when he came back from a visit to a moorland farm, he found her sitting by the fire in the hall. The light was getting dim but the glow from the logs fell on her, and he noted her quick nervous movement as he came in.

"I'm afraid I startled you," he said, stopping close by. "I've been walking about a wet bog all afternoon, examining drains, and it looks very cosy here. I won't disturb you if I sit down?"

"Of course not," she said. "It's your house."

"I suppose it is, but I don't quite grasp that yet. Perhaps it's too big, or I'm better used to a boat, because although I've always loved Appleyard, it doesn't seem homely. There's something wanting."

"You miss Dick," she said, with a touch of colour. "Though he was often ill, it's wonderful how bright he was."

"Yes; I miss him all the time, but perhaps not as you do," Andrew replied, with gentle sympathy.

Elsie gave him a quick glance and then turned her head.

"After all, it looks as if you loved him best. You tried every means of protecting him, while I sent him on a dangerous errand when I knew he was ill."

"You generously let him go; he went because he wanted. Dick never shirked a risk, and, least of all, when he could help his friends."

Elsie's face was flushed, but her voice was calm. "You must know the truth, Andrew. At first, I felt horribly guilty, but I see now that what I did was right. If I had thought of Dick as you seem to imagine, that is, if he'd been my lover, I hope I should have been brave enough to send him when there were two lives at stake—but I can't be sure."

"Then you didn't love him in that way?"

"No," she said, with strained quietness, "not in that way. I would never have married Dick."

Andrew's face got tense and his voice was sharp. "There was somebody else?"

"Yes," she said, with a curious smile, while the colour crept to her forehead. "In some respects, you're not very clever, Andrew, or you might have guessed."

He looked at her with a deepening glow in his eyes and she added, shyly: "It was you."

Andrew said nothing, but took her in his arms.

THE END.

